

**WAYS TO UNDERSTAND THE NEW READER:  
A PROPOSAL OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF  
READING THE LITERACY STUDIES**

**CAMINHOS PARA COMPREENDER O NOVO LEITOR:  
UMA PROPOSTA DE DIÁLOGO ENTRE A HISTÓRIA CULTURAL DA LEITURA  
E OS ESTUDOS DO LETRAMENTO**

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**Abstract:** In this article I try to weave some characteristics related to Cultural History, whose proposals for a new historiographic established from the nineteenth century, especially with Roger Chartier and Miguel de Certeau in the French current, who well dialogue with studies developed by Bourdieu. Besides, I introduce the phenomenon of representation and the reflections of the culture concept to its theoretical-methodological contribution, turning to a dialogue proposed between CH and the Literacy Studies (STREET, 1984; OLIVEIRA, 2008), from which many problems emerge, especially concerning to identity issues to better understand what the so-called *new reader* is.

**Keywords:** Cultural history; historiography; literacies; reading practices.

**Resumo:** No artigo em questão busco tecer algumas características referentes à História Cultural, cujas propostas de um novo fazer historiográfico estabeleceram-se a partir do século XIX, sobretudo com Roger Chartier e Miguel de Certeau na corrente francesa, que bem dialogam com estudos desenvolvidos por Bourdieu. Ainda, introduzo o fenômeno da representação e os reflexos do conceito de cultura para seu aporte teórico-metodológico, voltando-me para uma proposta de diálogo entre a HC e os Estudos do Letramento (STREET, 1984; OLIVEIRA, 2008), a partir do qual emergem diversos problemas, sobretudo referindo-se a questões de identidade a fim de melhor compreender o que seria o chamado *novo leitor*.

**Palavras-chave:** História cultural; historiografia; letramentos; práticas de leitura.

## **Introduction**

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The repetitive results achieved by the traditional historiographical work, usually by means of temporal quantification, have made History approach the crisis which the social sciences passed, in general, in the early nineteenth century.

With the formulation of the study field of Cultural History, new horizons for problems that already existed could be contemplated, so that some association with other areas became essential for the success of the discipline.

On the French current, the studies developed by Pierre Bourdieu converge with the thinking modes of Michel de Certeau and Roger Chartier, as well as that of the Italian Carlo Ginzburg, whose contribution to the development of Cultural History, especially from concepts such as representation and appropriation, among others, is very relevant.

This article presents some of the thinking that underlies the CH and that renewed not only the historiographical making, but the representation of ordinary and scholar readers in their reading practices, including influencing the mechanisms of production and cultural goods and the circulation of texts directed or not to the lower classes of society.

Furthermore, I assume the main aim of this text as an attempt to translate what is the contemporary new reader. From the perspective of CH it is possible to access considerations on reading practices, with regards to both the cultural good, it is, the book, and the reader subject. It must be clear that I use European scholars in their specific context for discussing who the new reader in Brazil is. To do that, the expression new reader must be double-understood: a) in its original sense from CH, which refers to the subject that have not intentional access to a given text; and b) under the light of what people read nowadays, especially Brazilians.

The importance of understanding what people currently read is linked to the configuration of the whole society. Through this perception, although it is not what I intend to do in this text, elements of culture can be described and improvements can emerge with views to a better quality of education and development of world reading, what is directly related to one's experiences in life.

For the discussion I propose now on, knowledge on the New Literacy Studies (STREET, 1984; OLIVEIRA, 2008) will probably help the comprehension of reading and writing practices, not necessarily addressed to reading a written text or writing in fact, but regarding the ways to read the world and to write in it based on experiences.

## 1. A Brief approach on the Cultural History of reading

The 1960s and 1970s represented a revolution in the way historical investigations were conducted. The so-called *third generation of annals* turned to social facts in order to better understand human complexity and how it was outlined from the representation of its practices.

A historiographical reformulation culminated in the movement that was known as New History (LE GOFF and NORA, 1988), and developed, among other less widely disseminated aspects at the time, the history of mentalities. This method, however, received a number of criticisms, especially considering that mentalities would have interdependence with a single imaginary, common to all people, ignoring social, cultural and ideological characteristics, for example.

The method of quantitative data processing in historiographical research was abandoned along with mentalities. The inconsistency of time quantification generated repetitive and unilateral results, of reduced perspective, even though a large amount of data was required for its performance.

With the denial of mentalities, but still using studies related to the mind, the history of representations gains space by conceiving social subjects as ordinary individuals, different from each other, submerged in different contexts that would consequently lead to different practices.

Through the representation, it became possible to understand the local appropriation of the global, and this achievement had great importance for the life of history as a discipline, since the great crisis in social sciences and the crisis in the Marxism and structuralism currents pre-determined history to have no more field of investigation.

Barros (2003) recognizes that the Cultural History practiced in the old times was an elitist history, not only in relation to the subjects involved in it, but also to the objects produced of it. On the other hand, this does not mean that the recognized high culture, especially classical books, music and works of art do not interest historians anymore. There is a growing interest in historiographical studies that deal with the classicity of culture, since CH has made new perspectives of research problems to be investigated.

No longer were the artifacts produced at that time were the only a reflection of culture, but the whole communicative process and the ways of language use in the social context represented the cultural points of view of a people.

The conceptualization of the term *culture* was completely reformulated and the contributions coming from CH, as well as from the semiotic theory of culture, organized and disseminated by Lotman and his colleagues from the School of Tartum-Moscow, especially the concept of semiosphere (LOTMAN, 1996) , played a fundamental role in this process (BARROS, 2013).

In a broad perspective, the maturing of Marxist studies, among them the works of Eric Thompson, who greatly influenced the Brazilian historiography of the twentieth century, is rooted in authors such as Georg Lukács (1885-1971) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) The first scholar, dealing with the problems of culture for the aesthetic field, and Gramsci, in turn, understanding that the intelligentsia is an integrating part of all individuals, although not all practice it in a written form, extending the horizon for further studies on the multidiversification of the subjects that produce culture.

Contemporary scholars such as Roger Chartier, Carlo Ginzburg, and Michel De Certeau have made very important contributions to this field of study, among which I care much about the researches that deal with reading practices and their representations in the social context. Chartier and De Certeau, part of the group of French historians allied to Cultural History, denied the view that cultural relations were part of particular social groups (BARROS, 2003).

The way Chartier reflects the concept of representation is at least innovative, especially since it admits that history cannot translate reality. There is no text that can do it completely. The text can at most represent it. In the light of this understanding, the real is not configured as real, it does not exist effectively and perceptibly. To be perceived as real, it must be represented.

Nevertheless, in one of his most famous texts, *The World as Representation*, Chartier attests that the conflicts which make up the background of the social do not occur exactly in the social, but in the representations. On the basis of this, every kind of social structure would be represented, and every inquiry would be of the representation of something. The focus is then on how representations are built and how they are manifested in a given structured social organization.

The work developed by Chartier throughout his academic life, and on which this article is based, given the dimension of his theorization and the richness of his thought, focuses the

transfers between oral culture and written culture and the representations of practices which span from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

Every methodological reflection is rooted in a particular historical practice, in a specific work space. Mine is organized around three poles, generally separated by academic traditions: on the one hand, the critical study of texts, literary or not, canonical or forgotten, deciphered in their assemblies and strategies; on the other hand, the history of the books and, in addition, of all the objectives contained in the communication of the writing; and finally, the analysis of practices that are learned from symbolic goods, thus producing different uses and meanings (CHARTIER, 1991, p. 178).

In the context of the above, it is understood that Cultural History, in its most modern aspect, has its efforts focused on mechanisms involving cultural objects of all kinds, not just those officially recognized as such. In this line, both the mechanisms of production and the reception mechanisms matter, since the modes of reception of a text produce, in a certain way, culture, according to the contexts of insertion of the reader.

## **2. What the *new reader* is: a bridge to connect CH and Literacy**

Those who have a capacity for reading do not read in a similar way (CHARTIER, 1991), the techniques employed and the reception of the writing are configured in different instances, and “the distance is great between talented scholars and less skillful readers, asked to oralize what they read in order to understand, only feeling free with certain textual or typographic forms” (p.179).

The cultural deviations of each reader or group of readers have a direct influence on the habit and way of reading. The specificity of the produced materials deals with a double articulation of the produced materiality, on the one hand, it imposes differences from the inequalities of distribution, on the other, it ignores the signification process by those one passes when takes over a text (CHARTIER, 1991) .

Although I use in this text an essentially European theoretical apparatus, I believe in a possible conceptual interrelationship with the case of reading in Brazil. The Brazilian context of reading hinges on the discourse of immaturity and lack of cultural preparation to deal with literate practices, coming from the characteristics existing in the country in the nineteenth century. It is based on the question of new readers, although recognizing the difference of the expression treated by the European group and how it is understood in the Brazilian scenario, I allow myself to analyze the profile of the reader in this country.

Guimarães (2004, p.66) gathers data that express such historicized characteristics. The Brazilian population was composed of approximately 30% of the literate people. The 1872 Census found that when considering only the free population, 18.6% could read and write, so that by adding to this proportion the slave population, the average fell to 15.7% of people who had reading and writing skills, already including in these data the population of school age.

At present, the numbers, although proportionately better, point to another characteristic that reaffirms the non-reader identity of the Brazilians, television. Moreira (2009) approaches in his text a panorama extracted from researches related to the time that the Brazilians spend watching television and concluded that, instead of readers, we are eager viewers. This argument, however, should not be understood as a form of reduction of the audiovisual culture over the reader culture, on the contrary, it is even characterized as a form of literacy, but is attached here to associate it with the poorest niches of society, who watch more television than read books.

Machado (2000) justifies a country where 80% of the population watches television and 90% of homes have at least one television set, because of the reading practices and the way one reads and one deals with the text and images.

It is by taking these data and adding them to the high taxes writers had to pay to have their writings published, that they went attached their failure on the audience, especially when facing foreign publications.

In fact, the watershed between literates and illiterates is an issue that has lasted since the nineteenth century when discussions began on the concentration of literary production in Rio de Janeiro. Guimarães (2004, p. 47) attributes these characteristics to what he refers to as a “malformed society” in terms of geographic planning and communication that made access to written material more difficult and increased the abyss between the common man and the literature of the time.

The great contemporary readers “have difficulty in accepting that there are other readings in addition to their own, or even in conceiving that between their reading of the scholarly and those of the majority there are other differences” (CHARTIER, 1996, 19). What can be verified as a worldwide trend is the access to materials that circulate electronically and that have reach that overlaps the physical materiality of a cultural object.

Access to electronic gadgets and the Internet guarantees to the lower classes (non-miserable) the existence of written material which, prior to its digital propagation, was only accessible to members of high culture.

What matters to Cultural History, in this sense, as it was approached in the past, is the way in which the mechanisms of cultural production are configured, now by the ordinary reader.

Even though the circulation of written production has gained considerable space in Brazilian society, it should not be ignored that not all the classes have access to this circulation and those who have also depend on the appropriation of knowledge that will allow this access.

The recent Literacy Studies that are no longer confused with alphabetization processes are developed to consider the need of competences of an individual or social group to appropriate certain cultural facts. In this sense, Oliveira (2008, p.114) proposes that looking at the phenomena of literacy

as a social practice implies understanding that language actions are produced and interpreted by a cognitive subject, but also cleaved by the interferences of the lived world from which he constructs representations, beliefs, feelings, forms of social regulation, and himself. There is, therefore, no displaced literacy of the subject that produces him and the context that surrounds him.

As well as other denominations that specify a branch of socially literate activity, the digital literacy would be responsible for the development of competences that make possible the access to information, that although being guaranteed, it only is through paths that require specific abilities for that purpose. With these considerations, one can see the possibility of establishing a consistent dialogue between issues of Cultural History and Literacy Studies, since for both the environments of the notion of culture and the social facts directly related to it, this dialogue is very dear.

In any case, regarding the electronic circulation of written material, it must be taken into account that, in order to consolidate this scenario as it has been occurring in the last decades, production techniques have also been transformed and re-signified.

De Certeau (1994) emphasizes the exacerbated need for reading in contemporary society and the distribution of cultural goods in diverse supports that make it possible to reach this need. The author also draws attention to the neglect of this panorama by researchers, who have long been associated with two circumstances that have now been overcome: a) concern with the possession of cultural goods and the respective uses that would be made with them; and b) the design of the reader as a passive subject, who receives the text automatically, without effort. The author positions himself against this reductionist view, since he considers that reading is

“fluctuation through the page, metamorphosis of the text by the traveling eye, improvisation and expectation of induced meanings of certain words, intersections of written spaces, ephemeral dance” (ibid., p. 49), and converges with Chartier’s (1991, 181) understanding when he states that “reading is not only an abstract operation of intellection: it is putting the body into play, it is inscription in a space, relationship with oneself or with each other”.

Cultural History and its studies have long been concerned with the representation of reading practices, and with the difficulty of tracking the indications of reading practices, for example those that start electronically, the notion of *new readers* (HÉRBRARD, 2009; CURCINO, 2012), a term based on research that highlights those individuals who had access to texts that were not addressed to them.

The new reader, in short conceived as a popular reader, uses, as discussed earlier, reading techniques distinct from those employed by the erudite reader, to whom restricted cultural production was (and is) directed.

In Brazil, Curcino (2012) attributes to the process of mass literacy that occurred from the 1970s, through which the essence of rural life shifted to the urban space, then the existence of a “very heteroclite set of readers” (p. 1015), who needed to adapt to radical changes and differentiated development to certain cultural facts, so that the current context of the country includes illiterate individuals, partially literate individuals and individuals with a high degree of literacy.

According to the author,

we currently see on the Internet a significant, very heteroclite and little known group of adult readers, who have quite variable degrees of literacy, mostly not born in the information age and largely not belonging to groups that enjoy the cultural capital produced and guarded by an intellectual or academic elite who do not know the authoritative and legitimating reading practices of texts directed or adopted by erudite culture or of socio-cultural prestige (CURCINO, 2012, p.1015).

In addition to electronic media, low-cost versions of books previously intended for scholarly readers are commonplace today. Classical Brazilian literature, for example, is available for purchase at newsstands or in grocery stores that offer a small space for book exposure. Reprinted works, printed on low weight paper, usually with a standardized cover that is used for several titles, have lower values than other more luxurious editions of the same text.

Resembling editions of *colportage* in France, the low-cost classics marketed in Brazil cost little for publishers, since they no longer need to pay copyright to authors under public domain, and use low-quality materials to produce marketable books. They cost little, however,

from another angle, for the new readers, who would have access to the printed cultural good of a classic work, for example, although the language used in the texts may vary according to the edition.

The capitalist determination about cultural production and, to a certain extent, its preoccupation with the accessibility of the cultural good and the language with which the common reader is confronted, continue with the abyss existing between the erudite reader and the popular reader, who start to consume the same cultural goods, but presented in distinct supports and with distinct physical, linguistic and, consequently, ideological characteristics.

A hermetic writing is bad in the sense of underestimating the multiplicity language offers. Representations and symbols are a way of communication and interpretation of language and this a relevant idea for De Certeau (1994, p. 264) when he states that “a literature is less different than the other on the text than on how it is read” and that “a system of verbal or iconic signs is a reserve of forms that expect from the reader its meaning”.

Appropriating of a particular text aims to bind oneself to “a social history of the interpretations remitted to its fundamental determinations (which are social, institutional, cultural) and inscribed in the specific practices that produce them” (CHARTIER, 1990, p. 26).

As part of the sociocultural perspective on literacies, Bartlett (2007, p. 53) emphasizes that “literacy is something one actively *does*, in concert with other humans (who may or may not be physically present) and the material, social, and symbolic world”, and, quite generally, becoming literate is a continuous, timeless process in human life, in whose practices are means of interaction, in which the individual manifests, constructs, and reconstructs his identity continuously.

The author discusses in one of her earliest and most widespread texts among scholars in the area the need for the individual to seem literate, so that this legitimizes him as such in an essentially literate context. It should be noted that this literate opinion, in turn, is only legitimated based on the interaction with other individuals, that is, in an interpersonal relationship. However, the modification of the opinion admits the double possibility of being or not being, as French semiotics puts it, there is what it seems and is, and what it seems but is not, and this modality has tenuous ties with feeling. Feeling literate corresponds to an intrapersonal relationship with literacy.

To seem and feel literate the individual not only traces the paths of reading and writing, but manipulates a whole set of elements of criticality, sociability and culture in a process of

interaction, so the *artifacts*, as Bartlett names what I was earlier naming *goods* deserve great attention in this game.

Identity, being continually rebuilt, is associated with a process of constant improvisation in the interaction, and cultural artifacts play an important role in this improvisation.

To conceive the new reader from the range of comprehension possibilities of a text he disposes therefore seems more enriching and pertinent than the positive or negative determination of what the reader reads. This does not mean, however, abandoning the dimension of boundaries existing between the so-called high literature and the popular literature, the technical standards involved in one and the other, the patterns of language use directed towards a more or less literate society, for example, on the contrary, the dilemma of access to high literature by lower social classes should not continue as a dilemma, as many scholars propose in the temerity of a mixture that makes it indistinguishable from popular literature and of a prestige loss. There should not be a sense of temerity, just as there must be no such delimited separation from what high literature and popular literature are, since this serves exclusively to determine the reader's level of erudition, which converges to the systematicity of cultural prejudice.

### **Final lines**

This work deals with a more recent approach to historiographical making, the Cultural History, which began to contemplate innumerable new problems in need of investigation.

New ideas have been added to the notion of culture, which are responsible, in particular, for the recognition that human production is a cultural fact, and so it is carried out from the specific contexts that constitute it and that can be revealed through it, making feasible new understandings and representations of the cultural facts of an individual or social group.

I considered Roger Chartier as a guiding scholar for developing this text, but without ignoring the influence of Edward Thompson regarding the studies of representation that have been developed in Brazil.

The production mechanisms of cultural goods were also discussed, so as to observe the differences proposed and imposed by the cultural industry, in the sense of diminishing the space existing between the erudite reader, who uses specific skills to properly access a text, and the

popular reader, or the new reader, who started to have access to texts not originally addressed to him, as described Ginzburg in the case of Menocchio, in *The cheese and the worms* (1976).

It is interesting to consider before finishing my text that the circulation through electronic means came to popularize titles traditionally classified as erudite, adapting them to diverse supports of reading, thus accompanying an exaggerated need of reading in the modern society.

These initial discussion made the background for dealing with literacy issues. The New Literacy Studies provide elements to understand and properly translate reading and writing skills of a subject, not by considering only the physical aspect a text is written in, but the whole world and the experiences lived in it, which influence directly on the way we read and write things while we live.

On the last lines, I wanted to present some of Bartlett's understanding on what being literate really is, if it is possible to describe, and what means feeling and seeming literate in a world where literacies are content of uncountable supports everywhere and the need of reading is highly required.

This papers is then a proposal of making a dialogue between the Cultural History of reading and the Literacy Studies, once it possible to recognize contributions for each other and few studies have been developed even though the number of problems to be studied is high.

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