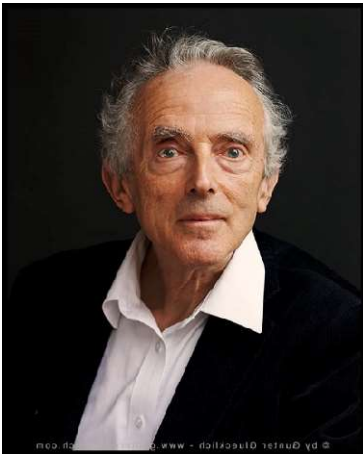


INTERVIEW WITH PETER BURKE

Conducted by Emma Giachino and Federica Ceresa (International Studies, University of Trento), and K.Setsen (yifei) (Comparative, European and International Legal Studies).

November 2022



Peter Burke is a British historian and professor at the University of Sussex (1962-79) and at the University of Cambridge (1979-2004), where he is now Professor Emeritus of Cultural History, and a Fellow of Emmanuel College. With his 26 books, translated in 31 languages, he is not only known for his work on the cultural and social history of early modern Europe, but also for his research on cultural history across its entire spectrum. That is what brought us to conduct this interview on the history of intellectuals in exile, a topic which he deepened in his book *“A Social History of Knowledge”* (2000).

The following interview draws on Professor Burke’s lecture “Intellectuals in Exile: Challenges and Responses”, that we had the pleasure to attend at the University of Trento. We are doing this interview in the context of a course offered by the University of Trento, in collaboration with Scholars At Risk, on Academic Freedom and Human Rights. Consequently, the interview is focused on the history of intellectuals in exile and the relationship that this phenomenon has with Academic Rights.

1. We are conducting this interview after attending your lecture on the history of intellectuals in exile; so firstly, we would like to know, why did you choose to approach the topic of exile in your studies?

I was already working on what I call the ‘social history of knowledge’, and after publishing two general studies, from Gutenberg to Diderot and from the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia, I was looking for a new angle of approach. At that point I was invited to give the Menahem Stern lectures in Jerusalem. A study of the distinctive contribution to knowledge of exiles and refugees seemed appropriate for the occasion, placing the ‘Great Exodus’ of Jews from Germany in the 1930s in a wider context, more especially a longer period. The topic also appealed to me because I have known so many exiled intellectuals, among them Isaiah Berlin and Arnaldo Momigliano.

2. During the lecture you mentioned that people who left their country because of religion introduced innovation and new prospects in theology studies. To what extent do the reasons for exile influence the field of study chosen by the exiles? Are there other patterns connecting the personal experience of exiled scholars and their work/studies?

I doubt whether the reasons for exile influenced the field of study – the theologians I mentioned were already theologians before they went into exile, and if they changed their views later, this was probably the result of debates with fellow-exiles. But there are, as you suggest, other connections. For some scholars, nostalgia drove their studies of the culture they had left behind them. For others, responding

to the challenge of living in the 'hostland' encouraged them to study and then to publish on the culture, history or literature of their new home. In some cases, notably law, the expertise of the exiles was not exportable, given the difference between the legal systems of (say) Germany and the USA, so they had to find a new field. A few of them chose the new field of International Relations, in which legal training was an asset.

3. The issue of Academic Freedom is closely linked to the history of intellectuals in exile: how would you illustrate this relationship from a historical perspective?

The issue of 'academic' freedom is relatively recent, but already in the 16th century, political as well as religious refugees chose to move to certain cities (Venice, Antwerp, Strasbourg, Basel etc) on account of their – relative – freedom of speech and of publishing.

4. In Hannah Arendt's article "we refugees" she mentions how they (Jewish exiles) are often told that nobody likes listening to their story in their homeland. How important is it for people in exile to speak about their experiences about violation of academic freedom in their homeland? How can institutions support the dissemination of their stories in order to raise awareness of the past, for the present?

There are obviously two sides to this question. On one, I am sure that there is a psychological need for exiles, like other people who have had traumatic experiences, to talk about them, to replay them, probably more often than their listeners in the hostland would like, as Arendt comments. On the other side, these listeners and their compatriots need to be aware of what had happened to the exiles, what had compelled them to leave, so the dissemination of their stories, as you suggest, should be encouraged. One way of doing this has been to found centres for the study of exiles and refugees, whether these centres are independent or form part of a university. In a university which lacks such a centre, it should not be difficult to give refugees a voice by organizing lectures, exhibitions, interviews or films on this topic.

5. In your lecture you mentioned that, when scholars were forced into exile, a great deal of knowledge was destroyed. For example, during Nazi Germany and the Cultural Revolution in China. Do you think we should pay more attention to the protection of knowledge when we focus on academic freedom, its violation and its consequences?

The loss of knowledge is an important topic that was neglected until relatively recently, though we now see publications on the destruction of books and libraries, for instance. The topic should also include the knowledge that was lost when scholars were killed, or museums pillaged. This focus on the loss of past knowledge is complementary to the focus on future knowledge, threatened when there are threats to the freedom to carry out research and to publish the results.

6. What is your understanding of academic freedom today? What can we learn from the history of exiled intellectuals and students, helping us with the development of academic freedom?

Education at all levels depends on the freedom of both teachers and students to express their ideas, but as the recent history of universities reminds us, this freedom may have limits, notably in the area of hate speech. Distinctions are in order here. We need to understand the ideas of fascists or white supremacists,

for instance, and for this purpose it may be illuminating to invite these believers to explain themselves, not in a lecture open to everyone, which encourages emotional speeches and sometimes violent confrontation, but in a small seminar which gives listeners the opportunity to question and criticize the speaker.

6. Would you give us any more insights into the fate of the female scholars you mentioned at the end of your book “Exiles and Expatriates in the History of Knowledge, 1500-2000”?

A few of them did well in their new environment, but not many were appointed to senior posts. However, in the 1930s, the date of the exile of the scholars I listed, they might not have been appointed to such posts if Hitler had not come to power and they had remained in Germany or Austria (how many female professors were there in the post-war Germanies?). What impressed me most about these female scholars was their adaptability, relative to their male colleagues, their willingness to work as waitresses or nannies until an academic opportunity came up.