

Peter Burke: “Having instant access to so much information is a blessing, but it comes at a cost.”

Jesús Piñero

What about the knowledge that has been lost over the centuries? Are we really less ignorant than those who came before us? These are the central questions of Ignorance: A Global History.¹ In this brief email interview, the author addresses a few more.

“Humanity is becoming less ignorant than in the past, thanks to research in both the sciences and the humanities, but as individuals we are as ignorant as our ancestors, just about different things,” says British historian Ulick Peter Burke when I ask whether we’re truly wiser today. I don’t ask the question at random. I have just read the first chapter of his new book *Ignorance: A Global History* and was fascinated, which is why I emailed him with little expectation of a quick reply.

His reply reached my inbox in less than a week: “Dear Mr. Pinero, good to hear from you. I don’t hear very well, so an interview by phone or even Zoom might not work. And in any case, although I read Spanish, I don’t speak it (though I do speak Brazilian Portuguese).” I’ve never liked

¹ Peter Burke, *Ignorancia: Una historia global*, Alianza editorial, 2023.

interviews by email: not only does the humanity of dialogue get lost, but follow-up questions are always harder to frame. Still, I ended up accepting his proposal: “But if you send written questions in Spanish, I would be happy to send answers in English.” Of course, Mr. Burke.

Over the last 87 years —the current age of Burke— not only has the world changed, but so have the ways and sources through which we understand the past; in other words, the historiographical currents themselves. When young Ulick began taking his first steps in the London neighborhood of Stanmore in 1939, the journal *Annales*, founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, was celebrating its first decade, and Marxism was just beginning to make its way in response to the crisis of positivism, which had been floundering since the late 19th century. Burke was thus born in the midst of the historiographical revolution of the 20th century —the one to which historians owe the very profession itself.

That is why it is no coincidence that his main contributions —aside from focusing on the understanding of the Early Modern Age— are rooted in the use of *new sources* and methodologies for the study of the past, sources we now take for granted when conducting research; hence the italics: art, literature, music, cinema, and so on. And it could not have been otherwise: the 20th century was the century of media, of mass cultural production, of television, musical hits, cinematic premieres, and bestsellers. Society changed, and with it, the formats through which it must be studied. To ignore that would be to deny history.

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And that is also the focus of his new book: opinions about the past often run into a dichotomy: either we believe we are wiser than people in earlier times, or we believe that everything was better back then. But are we truly less ignorant than our ancestors? Or did past societies possess knowledge superior to what we have today? In *Ignorance: A Global History* (Alianza Editorial, 2023), Burke sets out to answer these questions by tracing key moments in human history, situating them within their respective contexts, and contrasting them with what has been studied about the very concept of ignorance.

I took a few days to prepare for the exchange: I reread the book, researched more about his life, searched for past interviews, and even mentioned it to several colleagues. Once I felt ready, I sent the email and decided to put the matter out of my mind. Perhaps he wouldn't reply. Perhaps time would work against me, and the conversation I had prepared for so carefully would never take place. But that wasn't the case. In less than two days, an email arrived in my inbox with an attached document containing his responses —in impeccable British English, complete with italics and an admirable precision. The file was named simply with his lowercase initials, followed by a hyphen and my surname: pb-pinero.

—We live in a hyper-informed society, yet this overload of information doesn't always translate into less ignorance. How dangerous is it to be overinformed, or to have immediate and unlimited access to knowledge?

Having immediate access to so much information is a blessing, but it comes at a cost. Our time is limited, and thus we

must choose what we want to know and what to ignore, and we may not always choose wisely. In any case, what we often get is raw information, whereas what we want –or should want– is knowledge: processed information that has been verified, critiqued, and classified. What we actually have access to is information that is often inaccurate and potentially biased, provided to serve the interests of individuals or organizations. We, the recipients, must learn to be critical of this mass of information and to select carefully from it.

–If we are closer to knowledge, why does it seem as though the world is heading toward an abyss? Climate change, the crisis of democracy. More and more figures like Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, or Chávez keep emerging...

This pessimism may be the result of greater knowledge. Global warming, for example, was happening long before most people became aware of it. As for the rise of populism today, democracy has faced crises before: consider Hitler, Mussolini, Franco... The problems are real, yet they are not confined to the present moment..

–Speaking of the crisis of democracy, are you familiar with what is happening in Venezuela? There aren't many references to Latin America in your book.

I know a little about recent events in Venezuela, but not much. I've never been there. I know more about Argentina, Chile, and especially Brazil, which is mentioned several times in my book. You see? I, too, am ignorant about many things.

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–All right, but regarding the little you know about the situation in Venezuela, do you think Venezuelans were ignorant of the past when they chose Hugo Chávez?

Yes, but they are not alone. In democratic elections, many voters know little about the candidates and their policies, making it difficult to determine the basis of their choices. Surveys on voter ignorance are revealing and alarming. As for Chávez, I don't know enough to answer that question. Like everyone else, I must choose what to know.

–How dangerous is it when people and their leaders ignore the past?

–Although history never repeats itself exactly, similar situations do recur, and there are many examples of leaders making the same mistakes as their predecessors, mistakes that could have been avoided with greater knowledge of the past. Otto von Bismarck once said, "Only fools learn from their own experience; I prefer to learn from the experience of others."

–What do you consider is the greatest knowledge we have lost as a society?

There isn't a single piece or form of knowledge I would privilege in that way. However, I am concerned about the decline of historical knowledge, now that less time is devoted to it in schools –at least in Britain– than when I was a student. Much of that time is spent on national history. To properly educate future citizens, more time should be devoted to world history from the last 100 years.

–Will we ever be able to eliminate ignorance, or is it necessary?

We will always be ignorant of something.

–Then, what is the role of historians in the face of ignorance?

We try to help people understand the world they live in, including the social and cultural structures underlying the current events discussed in the media. These structures change, but only slowly, over the long term. We can also help people become critical of the news –whether it is false, inaccurate, or superficial. What is sometimes pompously called “critical information studies” today has long been familiar to historians; it is simply “source criticism.”

Authors

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He is a Venezuelan writer, has been a professor, and is recognized as a tenacious promoter of literature and culture in his country. He has created and participated in publishing and literary dissemination initiatives in Venezuela. Known as an expert chronicler of the city of Caracas, he has delved into the soul of the city to tell stories that encapsulate that soul in all its splendor. Héctor Torres, together with Albor Rodríguez, is the creator of *La vida de nos*, a renowned organization that carries out a creative and innovative crusade to resist and record the times that Venezuela is currently experiencing. Less known for his love of music, Héctor Torres is one of the essential references in Venezuelan culture today.

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