The renowned Russian medievalist Aron Gurevich has turned 80 this year. I shall attempt here to discuss all that historiography of the twentieth century owes to him.

Gurevich’s work was written and elaborated upon against the background of the problems of researching and writing history in the erstwhile Soviet Union, and later in the early years of Russia’s “desovietisation.” Aron Gurevich was a robust intellectual and scientist, not a dissident. He was able to work in modest research posts and above all managed to establish intellectual relationships and exchanges with historians in Western Europe; this enabled his work to be translated, read, admired and discussed outside of Soviet Russia.

If Aron Gurevich succeeded in keeping abreast of the historio-graphical revolution in the West, and in particular in recognizing very early the renewal of the discipline led notably by the movement of the *Annales* in France, the principal impulse of the renewal of his own historical and methodological thinking came from his personal endeavor, which points to his very original personality. The path he chose was multidisciplinary, but it privileged two concepts in particular that are themselves a synthesis of multifaceted areas: that of anthropology and that of culture. Privileging culture in this manner was also a way of posing an alternative to Marxist economic determinism. This direction was inscribed within a larger European (and international) moment of liberation from the dictatorship of the economy, Marxist and non-Marxist. Yet Gurevich never excluded economics from his vision of the history of human society; rather, he preferred to view it through the eyes of culture—the mentality of human beings—for he was greatly interested in the French history of mentalities, though all the while maintaining a certain distance from it. His attention in particular was focused upon the new personage in

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medieval European society, the merchant. He has given us an elegant essay, “The Merchant,” in a collection edited by him, The Medieval Merchant, published in Italian in 1987 and in French in 1989. Concepts from anthropology led him to wider horizons, which he then opened up to French historians—medievalists in particular—bearing the label of historical anthropology. This concert allowed Gurevich to explore the history of those people as well as social groups which were neglected, if not excluded, by the narratives of the traditional grande histoire. Two domains in particular became the focus of in-depth study: one being geographical and cultural—the Scandinavian world and the other social and cultural—that of “popular culture.”

Gurevich devoted several of his works to Scandinavian culture—his first love, which he never abandoned—one of the bases and sources of his rich historical vision. The Viking Raids, published in Moscow in 1966, was the first. His doctoral thesis of 1967 was The Free Peasants of Feudal Norway. His essay History and Saga appeared in Moscow in 1972, followed by Edda and Saga in 1979. In the same year, Norwegian Society of the High Middle Ages was published in Moscow. One should add to this ensemble the important article “On Heroes, Things, Gods and Laughter in Germanic Poetry,” which appeared in Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History (vol. 5, pp. 105-72), where we encounter once again his deep interest in Nordic culture, in mythological literatures and epics (the literary source in important for him) and in a cultural phenomenon which was a subject which brought us together: laughter.

However, Aron Gurevich is largely known in the West for his 1983 work entitled Categories of Medieval Culture, which was part of a prestigious series of the Editions Galliard. The Italian translation of another work in the preceding year, The Origins of Feudalism, with a foreword by Raoul Manselli (new edition in 1990) brought Gurevich recognition in Italy. It owed its favorable reception in Italy to, among other factors, its advocacy of a Gramscian, more-open interpretation of Marxism.

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