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The Historical Lecture: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

The oral performance of history has been common to many societies from Herodotus and the histories of Beowulf, to the griots of West Africa. The lecture in Western history emerged from these histories of orality, with its name showing the close connection in its origins to reading, and to the lecturer's expertise in that domain. From this starting point, lectures grew to be associated with frameworks of academic authority, as well as markers of community and shared academic, religious and civic identity. From the late eighteenth century onwards, the role of the historical lecture widened to involve public education, and was also later incorporated into political contestations by anticolonial orators such as Maya Angelou, Amílcar Cabral and Fidel Castro. In the twenty-first century, the rise of transnational technology has seen the increasing atomisation of the lecture into a space of performative and disembodied information. As technologies change, in the future the knowledge and thematic being explored in historical lectures may change. What is embraced may prove to be demonstration of mastery of the commercial technology involved in a lecture's delivery, as much as the exposition related to the lecture or reading from which knowledge and academic communities historically have built.

Keywords: lecture; history; orality; feminism; technology

The opening lines of the old Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, as rendered in Michael Alexander's translation, offer a good starting point for the discussion which I hope to develop here:

*Attend!
We have heard of the thriving throne of Denmark,
how the folk-kings flourished in former days,
how those royal athelings crowned that glory.*

Was it not Scyld Shefing that shook the halls,
 took mead-benches, taught encroaching
 foes to fear him – who, found in childhood,
 lacked clothing. Yet he lived and prospered,
 grew in strength and stature under the heavens
 until the clans settled in the sea-coasts neighbouring
 over the whale-road all must obey him
 and give tribute. He was a good king!¹

The context of the relationship between the historian and audience for *Beowulf* is made clear in Alexander's introduction. As he notes, 'much of the characteristic power and beauty comes from what I take to be the traditional poetic and narrative forms of public oral performance. Like the "winged words" of Homer, *Beowulf* was composed to be projected in public performance – to be sung or spoken aloud.'² Thus in the context of the late seventh and early eighth century in which the version which we now have was formalised in script, the relationship between the historian and their public was an oral, performative one. Should the audience choose to attend, or listen, then they would be recounted a history which sharpened and made sense of their collective identity, whilst offering an Anglo-Saxon version of the twentieth-century 'American dream', in which the impoverished child becomes a great king – all the while dwelling in the nether regions between fact and myth in which history has so often resided.

This relationship between history and myth is well attended to in linguistic terms by the words in many European languages for 'history' – the French *histoire*, Spanish *historia*, Italian *istoria*, all refer both to the field of history and to the story which is at its heart, the oral storytelling from which history as a field has been born. By contrast, our familiar English 'history' suggests at once a field and practice which is more objective and measured than any mere story. And yet oral stories, and storytelling, lie at the origins of what communities understand as history – not only in the old Anglo-Saxon, but also as we will shortly see in many world cultures.

Indeed, to consider the lecture in a historical analysis, it straightforwardly becomes apparent that this is a global history – something which unites peoples from the Pacific Ocean and Asia to West Africa and Europe. Historical frameworks and understandings emerged in Sri Lanka, the Pacific Islands, the civilisations of West Africa and the symposia of ancient Greece, as oral. Speech gave power to history, gave it shape and told the stories through which it became real – and this is something that unites civilisations in all parts of the world. Over time, that speech became inscribed in texts, and texts came to be privileged in the historical canon – and yet the authority of those written texts very often derived from the proficiency of their authors

¹ *Beowulf*, trans. Michael Alexander (Harmondsworth, 1973), 51.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

in delivering speech in a public setting, in the theatre of performance and the interaction with the audience which that required.³

The twentieth-century Western privileging of written sources – the ‘documents’ – in the construction of history is therefore something of a historical outlier. While it may speak to the tyranny of the written word, it cannot supplant the underlying structure of the relationship between the written and the oral. And while that tyranny may indeed also be very old – here I recall R. I. Moore’s classic book *The Formations of a Persecuting Society*,⁴ where persecution is linked by Moore to the spread of the scribal class – the oral underpinnings are even older.

All of this is to give some context to the present lecture. Orality and the oral performance of history have always been at the heart of the relationship between the historian and their audience. That relationship is fundamentally a dynamic, interactive one. Through the means of the lecture, that relationship has been institutionalised for many centuries. The oral relationship remains in place, because it is through the means of speech that lectures are delivered in 2022, as they have been for thousands of years. However the mode of delivery of that speech has changed radically in the past two decades – and especially during the past two years of the pandemic.

The historian-speaker in many instances refers now to their presentation, rather than their lecture. Hence, the digital lecture has now taken its place within the production of economic value, through the role of algorithms in harvesting data from Zoom attendees. And indeed, there is nothing new in the place of historical production in capitalist accumulation, as historians of nineteenth-century ‘print capitalism’ can attest. Nevertheless, the online lecture fundamentally reframes the relationship between orator and audience. It’s my argument this evening that by attending to the nature of this transformation, we can think more carefully about the historian’s craft as a whole – and also the nature of our present time in particular.

However, this will not be a presentation – a word which smacks of the technological interface linking speaker to audience in a boardroom, committee or corporate conference hall, rather than of the interaction of speaker and public which used to be connoted by the concept of the ‘illustrated lecture’. It will be a lecture – because I have nothing to sell, except for the idea of speech as a performance of historical knowledge, rather than one more mode of the conveying of information.

We can begin by extending further our understanding of the importance of orality in the relationship between the historian and their audience. This is something that has tended to characterise the historian in all cultures. Indeed it is something that can help us to draw strong connections between cultures and world regions which have traditionally been seen as quite distinct.

³ On the relationship of orality to the history of the lecture, see W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982).

⁴ R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (Oxford, 1987).

In previous research, I have dwelt on the significance of the oral histories told by West African griots for modern historical reconstruction of the West African past.⁵ The reality of history as an oral genre in West Africa has long been recognised by historians.⁶ In a series of extraordinary works, the historian and specialist on Bamana society David Conrad has highlighted the significance of the oral epics in which the histories of the Mali empire and the kingdom of Segu can best be located.⁷ Further work building on the pathfinding research of Bakary Sidibeh has highlighted the significance of repositories of oral histories in The Gambia both for documenting and detailing the historical past, and for recontextualising and providing new perspectives upon that past.⁸

In a recent book the historian Michael A. Gomez suggested that the oral histories recounted by griots had emerged interdependently with the textual historical culture of the empire of Mali – now known to have been widespread.⁹ This is an intriguing observation, since if true it would suggest that the interdependence between a historian's oral performance and written practice is very long-standing in many cultures. There is a phenomenon well known to scholars of oral history, known as 'feedback', where materials from written histories find their way into oral histories, and it could be that such a phenomenon is in fact very old. What becomes important is the word, and its fixity, in developing a historical outlook or discourse that can then be widely shared.

This interrelationship is of course as much modern as older. Once set in text, a standardised version of the oral performance or lecture can begin to circulate to a wider audience, as also happened in early Anglo-Saxon England once the stories of *Beowulf* that began to circulate probably in the sixth century were codified in text by the later seventh or early eighth century. In the twentieth and twenty-first century, moreover, it has been standard practice for historians to develop their own writing on the basis of lectures.¹⁰ This essay itself began life as a lecture that was given remotely, and the process of transforming that lecture into a written text has proved valuable in considering how the relationship between orality and text takes shape. What is gained

⁵ See Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (London and Chicago, 2019).

⁶ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985); P. F. de Moraes Farias, 'The Gesere of Borgu: A Neglected Type of Manding Diaspora', in *In Search of Surjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*, ed. Ralph A. Austen (Bloomington, 1998), 141–69; Donald Wright, 'The Epic of Kelefa Sane as a Guide to the Nature of Precolonial Senegambian Society – and Vice Versa', *History in Africa*, 14 (1989), 287–309.

⁷ David C. Conrad (ed.), *A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segu According to Tayiru Barbera* (Oxford, 1990); David C. Conrad (ed.), *Great Sogolon's House* (Oxford, forthcoming).

⁸ Toby Green, 'From Essentialisms to Pluralisms: New Directions in West African History from the Oral History Archive at Fajara, The Gambia', in *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects from the West African Past: Essays in Honour of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias*, ed. Toby Green and Benedetta Rossi (Leiden, 2018), 332–52.

⁹ Michael A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton, 2018).

¹⁰ See e.g. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986); Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England* (New Haven, 2018).

in the transformation from speech to text is perhaps consistency of argument and style, and the logical framework of an argument; whereas what is lost is the way in which emphasis in an argument can also be produced by inconsistency, pause and digression. On the other hand, the act of writing forces the speaker into a concentrated focus on harnessing a range of knowledge and sources which is not required by a lecture in the same way.

In terms of the relationship of oral and written historical texts, we can indeed move to more distant reaches of time and place than the West African historical past and Anglo-Saxon England. According to Paul Cartledge, the so-called ‘father of history’,¹¹ Herodotus, also developed his famous *Histories* through oral performance. Cartledge suggests that Herodotus – who was born near what is now Bodrum, in Turkey – may have recited portions of his *Histories* in front of large audiences at the quadrennial Olympic Games in Athens. Cartledge writes: ‘The work [Histories] at any rate gives the strong impression in a number of ways – its strung-together rather than periodic structure, its devotion to storytelling narration, and above all its aggressively personal presentation – that it was composed for oral, public recitation rather than for a private reading audience.’¹² However, gradually Herodotus’ *Histories* became available in part in written papyrus, and other works were also sold in this manner in Athens by the fifth century BCE.¹³

This relationship between orality and writing allows for further reflection as to the role of the historian and of the oral performance of history. Textual codification enables a standardised wide circulation of a historical discourse or idea, but the fact that in many cultures this codification has been based on an initial oral formulation is significant. It shows that oral performance of historical ideas has often conferred a certain legitimacy on the historian and their approach. Once a historian has been invited to offer an oral discourse on the past, that discourse may then be codified in written text, but authority is derived in part from the oral delivery in the first place.

That’s to say: performance matters. We may not recall the content of a lecture delivered years ago, just as we probably won’t remember the information we learnt thirty years ago, but we certainly may remember the performance style. The pauses, coughs, or whether the lecturer looked to the heavens or directly at us. The authority of the performance lends significance to a later written text, because the lecture – like the historical narrative – is also a form of theatre that has to be imagined.

This can help us now to begin to identify the significance of the lecture in the historical canon. The lecture derives from this tradition of oral storytelling in many cultures, in which the role of the storyteller is to splice myth and hearsay into a narrative story which provides a new sense or understanding of the identity and past of a political community. Just as Herodotus’ authority to codify his work in text appears to have derived from oral presentations of it,

¹¹ Attributed to Cicero – see Paul Cartledge, ‘Introduction’, in *Herodotus: The Histories*, trans. Tom Holland, xix.

¹² *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

so it is the lecturer's oral speech which then confers the acceptance of a written text, or book. Thus in fact the lecture is an essential aspect of the practice of written history – and this reproduces a very ancient relationship between orality and written text.

At the same time, we can see important elements of transformation in modern practices when we reflect on the examples we have considered so far. There is a strong element of the mythic, as many have observed of Herodotus' work for example. Tall tales make good stories, but over the past century as the discipline of History has professionalised, these tales have been seen not to make for 'good history'. The advance of what Isaiah Berlin called 'scientific history',¹⁴ alongside the professional historian's arsenal of what we call objective evidence, means that the conscious presentation of myth in twenty-first-century history should certainly be enough for any self-respecting historian to be dismissed from the collective. So I want to be clear that there is no myth involved in this presentation – unless that claim is also part of my mythos.

Certainly, the mythic endures in historical discourse, albeit in a different form. It survives today in ideas of progress, nation and honour which derive in part from the significance of the emerging arena of History during what is traditionally called the European Enlightenment, when historical-national myths supplanted religious ones.

We move now from the global frameworks of orality and their relationship to text, to something more specific. The concept of the 'lecture' with which most people attending this evening are familiar emerged in Western Europe in the fifteenth century.¹⁵ When it comes to the origins of this new concept in Europe, several elements of genesis are important. We must acknowledge the role of the Church, clerical orders and monastic libraries, the new printing technologies which expanded the production and availability of written texts, and also the origins of traditions of speech in the earlier frameworks of orality and learning which we have just considered. In sum, at a time of technological revolution, a new concept and practice emerged to convey the changing relationship of speech, knowledge and audience – something that may sound familiar.

The relationship between institutions of learning and what became known as the lecture in the West was certainly very old. Following the lead of nineteenth-century rewritings of history, many modern historians have traced this lineage to pre-modern Athens. In his study *The First Universities*, Olaf Pedersen discussed the development of learning in Athens, and distinguished the methods of education developed by Plato and his pupil Aristotle. The works of Plato and Xenophon were testament to the dialogic method of instruction, with, as we may note, orality the first principle – as the preservation of his works has shown. The writings of Aristotle, by contrast, are evidence of a

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, 'History and Theory: The Concept of Scientific History', *History and Theory*, 1 (1960), 1–31.

¹⁵ <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/lectura>.

different method, and indeed, suggests Pedersen, emerged from ‘dry lectures written down by Aristotle himself or his pupils’.¹⁶

Here we see the ancient nature of oral educational instruction, as we would understand it, and at the same time run up against some of the assumptions that have limited the appreciation of the lecture in recent times. Certainly dialogue of the Platonic style is more engaging than monologue. Yet are lectures necessarily dry? I expect that many people have attended lectures in which they or someone near them has fallen asleep. But is this response any different to the disconnection that can also take place during online lectures? Does the online lecture retain the space to awaken people from their – albeit metaphorical – dozing, in the way that this digression has tried to do?

In fact, that process of awakening in a lecture is very important. It is one of the things that a lecture and a lecturer tries to do – to awaken in an audience an awareness of the significance of the topic at hand. Along those lines, the process of actual sleep and then waking is an embodiment of the lecture’s potential. Whatever listeners may make of this, I think that everyone would agree that Pedersen’s view, published in 1997, certainly predates the era of the online presentation. Had he spent two years living on Zoom, he might have had a very different perspective on the dryness of the lecture.

Circling back to the origins of this digression, we find ourselves in what Plato would have called a process of recollection, recovering something we knew already (albeit not necessarily from a previous lifetime, as he conjectured in *Meno*). Orality, discussion and the lecture all characterised education in Athens. In the case of both Plato and Aristotle, these methods emerged from the educational institutions that they developed. Here we can trace several key elements of the nascent lecture. For Plato, the *Republic* not only laid out the ground rules of what was for him an ideal-type educational institution; it also integrated physical experience into this schema, for as Pedersen notes gymnastics were central to the practice of education in Plato’s worldview.¹⁷ Meanwhile, discussion and orality were key to the school developed by Aristotle, in which monthly symposia were arranged around defined topics. In other words, on the one hand, the lecture and education as a whole were linked to the physicality of experience and the integration of mind and body; and on the other they were linked to orality and discussion alongside scholarship.

How, then, did this relationship of oral speech and history transform itself in Western Europe into a concept so closely connected to reading – the ‘lecture’? The development of bibliographic cultures – and paradoxically their decline during the Middle Ages – was central to this change. At the high point of Athenian learning, the library at Alexandria, on the Egyptian Mediterranean, is estimated to have held anywhere between 100,000 and 700,000 manuscripts.¹⁸ Teams of scholars worked here, and it was in

¹⁶ Olaf Pedersen, *The First Universities: Studium Generale and the Origins of University Education in Europe*, trans. Richard North (Cambridge, 1997).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

Alexandria that some of the epics that circulated in Athens and beyond were codified to what became their standardised form, with the final redaction of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* made there, alongside the version of Herodotus' *Histories* that was passed down to posterity.¹⁹

This begins to show the relationship between textual scholarship on the one hand and the codification of oral histories on the other, which we have already been exploring. As we have seen, it is in the codification and circulation of oral texts that wider publics were reached – and created – and this was an attempt to fix and circulate oral texts which until then had been indeterminate. Of course, textual manuscripts circulated prior to the emergence of the scholarly culture in Alexandria. Yet it was there that they were finally codified, and preserved – and this relationship between orality and scribal scholarship based in the library was one which would become very important in the era immediately preceding the emergence of the concept of the 'lecture'.

Nevertheless, in the Mediterranean world, this flourishing textual and manuscript culture did not survive the decline of Roman power. From a scholarly and educational library of hundreds of thousands of volumes in Alexandria, the quantity of available books fell into decline over the next several hundred years – and also became confined in European societies to religious settings, including monastic orders and cathedral chapters, as the commercial book trade disappeared. The reduction was such that Pedersen estimates that, by the seventh century, in Western Europe 'all things considered, we have to conclude that a library could have been a source of national pride without exceeding 200 works'.²⁰

This process of the reducing of learning to ecclesiastical circles was not however confined to Europe. Indeed, the place of religious institutions in this practice of codification of texts was often also central outside of European cultural pasts, and, as in Europe, this monopoly was often retained until the dawn of the modern era. In Asia, Buddhist and Sanskrit texts were also initially preserved orally before being committed to writing; and in this role Buddhist monasteries were essential in adopting technologies of book-making.²¹ In West Africa, scholarship and the collection of books remained the preserve of the clerical class in Timbuktu until the fall of the Songhay empire in 1591.²² Thus over this period of time, in many world cultural contexts, access to manuscripts became circumscribed, within monastic and scholastic centres, while at the same time the number of available works declined dramatically – making reading into both a rare and refined knowledge.

As Elias Canetti, the Nobel Prize-winning writer, put it in his masterpiece *Crowds and Power*, 'secrecy lies at the very core of power'.²³ The relationship which this insight has to books and the culture of reading in medieval

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹ See e.g. Xinjiang Rong, 'The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave and the Reasons for Its Sealing', *Cahiers d'Extrême Asie*, 11 (1999), 247–75.

²² See e.g. Sékéné Mody Cissoko, *Tombouctou et l'Empire Songhay: Épanouissement du Soudan Nigérien aux XV^e – XVI^e siècles* (Paris, 1974).

²³ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stuart (New York, 1981), 290.

Europe was explored by Umberto Eco in his famous novel *The Name of the Rose*. In Eco's rendering, knowledge of forbidden texts, and their location in the byways of the labyrinthine monastic library which is hidden from all but a select number of monks, become the key to understanding a series of violent murders which take place in an abbey in northern Italy in 1327. And how was access granted to these books, but through authority – and the authority then to sermonise drawing upon the contents of the hidden books, which the blind murderer Jorge proceeds to do shortly before he is caught.

Thus, when we consider the emergence of the lecture in Europe in the sixteenth century, several factors must be borne in mind. In the first place there is the culture of the ecclesiastical institutions which had in previous centuries acted as the major centres for both learning and bibliophilia on the European continent, much as Buddhist monasteries served the same function in many parts of Eastern and Southern Asia. This culture then shaped the relation of biblical-centred learning to the oral exposition of that knowledge through preaching in the European monastic tradition. In the second place there is the long-established relationship of libraries to the preservation of and curating of oral knowledge. And thirdly, there is the reduced availability of texts, and the centrality of knowledge of these to the authority of anyone who might expound orally to others.

In other words, by the dawn of the fifteenth century, reading and the knowledge of literature had become central to the authority of the Christian preacher. That authority was jealously guarded. However, with the development of new printing technologies in the late fifteenth century, and as the number and availability of books grew exponentially, a new concept emerged to capture this relationship between a privileged or unusual knowledge of published written material on the one hand, and the authority to deliver this knowledge orally on the other. This was the lecture.

What little attention has been given to the historical evolution of the lecture attests to this relationship between the lecture and the huge expansion of the availability of books in the sixteenth century. It was this expansion which gave rise to a culture of secular rhetoric, which distinguished the art of lecturing from that of preaching. It was during this century that the concept of the lecture became widespread – and this was connected to the lecturer's practice of expounding their expertise from a lectern, the stand from which they would read. The skill and expertise of the lecturer in the art of reading derived from the 'specialist' – or we might say, secret – knowledge through which their authority to speak had been conferred. Access to reading, guidance through teaching in its highways and byways, and the development of a range of skills and expertise on which the lecturer could draw, were all related to the validation of their oral performance.

Here at once the relationship between the Western lecturer's practice and Christian tradition must be acknowledged – one that is significant, but not unique. This religious connection is indeed a thread which connects many aspects of lecturing and education through the centuries. In this case, the lectern – the object from which the lecturer reads, or read, in the sixteenth century – is a sibling to the pulpit from which the preacher would speak.

We can compare this structural relationship of lecturing and preaching to the late nineteenth century where, as the Finnish scholar Matti Klinge has noted, the relationship of university professors to their students was often modelled on the relationship of bourgeois Lutheran pastors to their congregations:

the academic teacher ... worked at home and gave his lectures in an auditorium, normally in the main building of the university. He received his students and colleagues mostly at home, where he had his own studio or library. This familiar atmosphere was a heritage from the classical vicar's house of the bourgeois tradition.²⁴

In the early modern period, this framework inherited from religious practice was central to the structuring of the lecture, and the relationship which this had to university life. Universities in Europe – Paris, Pisa, Salamanca and beyond – were deeply intertwined with the religious world. It was not that natural sciences were not taught, but that their exposition was always subordinate to religious life. This emerged most clearly in the career of Galileo Galilei in the first half of the seventeenth century, and the controversies which emerged surrounding his work on astronomy – and the obligation that the work which he produced must be approved by the cardinals of Rome.²⁵

Thus in this period the relationship between religious and academic power was essential, something that embraced not only the lecturer's oral presentation of their topics, but also their integration into the expanding and professionalising fields of education in the early modern period. However it is important here to acknowledge the stubborn persistence of more ancient forms of orality even as this pattern of professionalisation and subordination within a patriarchal religious hierarchy emerged. While the scholar Walter Ong has taken a Whiggish approach to orality's history in education – recognising the lecture's origins in oral cultures but seeing them as superseded by advances in technology, something which I will come back to²⁶ – my argument here this evening is that orality has not been superseded but rather has endured and underpinned the evolution of historical learning and exposition. And we can see that very clearly as professionalised lectures expanded in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This emerges in the centrality of rhetoric and oratory to the lecturer's craft in this period. By the late eighteenth century, the religious framework still endured not only in the relationship of the lecture to scholarship and its expounding from a lectern/pulpit, but also in the role of orality and rhetoric in aspects of the lecturer's appointment within university systems. As Klinge notes: 'The early process, even if not always practised, derived from the clerical world: applicants had to give special lectures and take part in disputations.'²⁷

²⁴ Matti Klinge, 'On Teachers', in *A History of the University in Europe, III: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Walter Rüegg (Cambridge, 2004), 123–62, at 145.

²⁵ Dava Sobel, *Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith and Love* (New York, 1999).

²⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

²⁷ Klinge, 'On Teachers', 134.

Thus the capacity to lecture was not only one which relied on specialist knowledge of texts, but also on the ability to deploy rhetoric in oral disputation – much as had been the standard norm in theological disputes, also of course grounded in book knowledge – in preceding times.

We can indeed see legacies of this framework of the *disputatio* in academic practice to this day. The standard framework of the lecture or seminar followed by questions, whether in the job talk, seminar room or Zoom lecture, emerges from the practice of oral disputation. This clearly shows the limits of seeing the expounding of knowledge through the lens of Whiggish history as ‘improving’ or transforming with advanced technologies. While technologies of delivery may change, the oral and its historical traditions remain central. Moreover, the idea that technologies may radically transform and improve education is revealed as a profoundly imperial one, lurking in discourse from our own era of the pandemic, back through the ethnographic studies of the twentieth century and beyond: the privileging of textual source and exposition in the historical canon was of course a means of distinguishing ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ European societies from those which could be dismissed as ‘pre-literate’, where in fact the craft, technique and authority of the lecturer still relied upon oral frameworks.

This power of oratory and rhetoric thus remained central, a testimony to the power of the orator and of oral culture within Western society that endured after the rise of the Enlightenment. A further symptom of the framework within which this came to be viewed is the connection drawn by Western scholars from this oral framework to classical Rome. Marcus Tullius Cicero is seen by many as the doyen of oratory, from which much of European rhetorical culture followed.

Cicero indeed expounded beautifully on the importance of oratory:

The art of speaking beautifully is greater and composed of more sciences and study than people can imagine ... [N]o person can become a speaker accomplished with any laudable capacity unless he has acquired knowledge of all significant objects and all liberal arts ... for unless there is something beautiful beneath the surface that the speaker feels and understands, rhetoric will remain an empty and childish stream of words.²⁸

Yet as we have already seen, this beautiful relationship between orality and knowledge is not something that inhered only to Rome; it has rather been a universal trait in human societies, and remains so to this day.

Drawing these threads together, we can see many important aspects of the emergence of the lecture in the early modern period. The relationship with books, and the historical connection of books to religious institutions, was a fairly universal one, linking Christian traditions in Europe, Islamic traditions in West Africa, and Buddhist traditions in Asia. In colonial Latin America, the profusion of universities – certainly in comparison to British colonial North America, as the late J. H. Elliott pointed out – was closely connected

²⁸ Pedersen, *The First Universities*, 20–1.

to the requirement to train and equip the proselytising clergy of the New World.²⁹ Thus many aspects of the lecturer's art derived from both the authority and practice of religious institutions. At the same time orality and rhetoric were central both to the development of knowledge and to the means through which the practices of the lecture gained social approval.

What, however, of the *historical* lecture itself? The rise of bourgeois society in the eighteenth century, and the technological and materialist frameworks associated with it, went with the institutionalisation of the field of history. These changes also began to revolutionise the purpose both of the lecture and of education in Europe, as the technical requirements of colonial societies changed. Already at the start of the eighteenth century, these changes were both predicted and lampooned by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, which was published in 1726. In the Third Book, Swift's protagonist is introduced to a number of extraordinary professors in the Academy of Balnibarbi, who have attempted to develop new technologies to reduce human excrement to its original food, replace silkworms with spiders, produce sunbeams from cucumbers, and transform labour and architecture so that it is immeasurably more productive. However, as Swift put it:

The only inconvenience is, that none of these projects are yet brought to perfection, and in the meantime the whole country lies miserably to waste, the houses in ruins, and the people without food or clothes. By all which, instead of being discouraged, they are fifty times more violently bent upon prosecuting their schemes.³⁰

Yet in spite of the hiccoughs, the materialist advance proceeded, and with it the development of a place for the field of history. Before eviscerating Swift's reactionary Luddite approach, however, we should recall that, as I argued in my book *A Fistful of Shells*, the scientific and material advances of liberal societies were the other side of the coin of economic warfare in West Africa, among other locations.³¹ The technical progress of the eighteenth century did also lead to economic ruination as described by Swift, for economic violence beyond Europe was ever the hidden face of liberal progress.

By the end of the eighteenth century, in Friedrich Schiller's inaugural lecture at the University of Jena in 1789, the purpose and nature of both modern Western history and the lecture began to become clear. In Schiller's introduction to his lecture, entitled, 'The Nature and Value of Universal History', he said: 'The sight of so many excellent young men, gathered here eager for knowledge and already revealing the talents which the approaching era will need, makes my duty a pleasure, but also makes me sensible of the burden

²⁹ J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, 2006).

³⁰ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Harmondsworth, 1985), 220.

³¹ Green, *A Fistful of Shells*.

and importance of that duty.³² Schiller more or less avers that the lecture, and its education, had become designed to produce the skills that bourgeois society needed in its material advancement – and as the nineteenth century unfolded, the discipline of History would become a handmaiden in that task, as it produced mythographies of nation that encouraged European colonial societies to hierarchise the world, and thereby materially to exploit the resources of those civilisations which were located in what today has become the Global South.

It's now possible to come directly to something that has been a permanent feature of this lecture so far, but that I have not yet confronted directly. This is the question of the patriarchal nature of much of the discourse regarding lecturing – that is, the patriarchal nature of oral power in many world historical societies, and who has held the authority to declaim.

One of the features of the cultures splicing orality and scribal reproductions of knowledge that we have considered is central: whether in the Buddhist or Christian monastery, or the Islamic madrasa of Timbuktu, the patriarchal monopoly on access to restricted knowledge, and the authority to speak that comes with this, is to say the very least striking. While in Christian convents women did have access to books, and could write, they had no power to speak. In general, book-learning, and the orality which was connected to it, and the speech of the lecture, was in very many world cultures the preserve of men. And in this sense we must conclude that not only did the lecture emerge from cultures of patriarchal oral authority, but that the lecture up to the time of the nineteenth century also helped to reinforce this patriarchal framework. As we have seen, orality is a marker of power, but also lends authority to written texts which then circulate – thereby reinscribing the power and authority of those (men) who speak.

Of course, the lecture's origins in religious institutions may help us to understand at least some of this process. The figure of the male priest, whether in Rome or in China, and the power of that priest to intercede between this realm and others, is reflected in the patriarchal hold on the lecture which, as we have seen, grew out of religious institutions. However, what may be significant is that in the nineteenth century, in the high age of European imperialism and the rise of the modern nation state and the public sphere, this tradition of patriarchal speech expanded alongside the expansion of what we may call publics. Women had long had to listen to male preachers in religious settings; however, now, as the role of the public lecture emerged, and the role of the lecturer grew, this patriarchal framing of society grew too.

This role of the lecture in the public sphere may indeed be one as-yet unexplored factor behind the acceleration of gendered inequalities in the nineteenth century. The place of the lecture in creating a public sphere has been widely discussed: from the public tours of famous nineteenth-century authors such as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain to the vigorous exhortations of travelling preachers such as William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, the

³² Friedrich von Schiller, 'The Nature and Value of Universal History: An Inaugural Lecture', delivered at Jena in 1789, *History and Theory*, 11 (1972), 321–34, at 322.

greater mobility provided by rail and steam was fundamental in the construction of new identities – alongside the print cultures in which all these lecturers of course also participated. Nevertheless, the role of the lecture in also accentuating patriarchal structures has been less widely discussed.

How this affected individuals is suggested in Juliet Barker's collective biography of Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë.³³ Barker describes the excitement with which at times the young Brontës would head from their home in Haworth to nearby towns such as Halifax to hear visiting preachers and lecturers. The rise of female education was of course one important aspect of social change in the nineteenth century, and yet on the other hand that went with the expansion of the reality of public speech as almost entirely a masculine pursuit. This was indeed what one historian has called 'the great period of civic participation',³⁴ and yet with that civic society shaped through patriarchal relationships, it was hard for this civic culture not to reproduce them at least in part.

This nineteenth-century expansion of the lecture's role in Europe is of course a key feature of its history. Yet it was also an era of contradictions. On the one hand, the role of public lectures and discussions expanded greatly. And yet on the other, the rhetorical and oratorical skill of the lecturer began to decline in significance, to be replaced by what was seen as 'pure scholarship'. Matti Klinge suggests that 'this evolution can be seen in linguistics: chairs in rhetoric and poetry increasingly became chairs of Latin and Greek philology ... and thus prowess as a poet, translator [or] orator became less important than scholarly merits'.³⁵ Perhaps the best person to exemplify this change was Friedrich Nietzsche, appointed to a chair of philology in Basel at the age of twenty-four, and yet found by many in person to be a poor and insubstantial speaker in public.

Nevertheless, as far as historians were concerned the lecture was very important. Asa Briggs discusses the significance of the lecture in striking terms, noting that: 'In the nineteenth century the lecture was a main instrument of inspiration as well as of instruction, and there are many accounts of the impacts of professorial lectures and lecturers on the seen audience'.³⁶ Briggs recounts a number of instances of this, and it is clear that while the disciplines of rhetoric and oratory may have been in decline, the appreciation of them was not. By the later nineteenth century, the academic discipline of history was fully formed, and the relationship between the historical lecture, political and gendered power and the pursuit of knowledge was fully established in colonising European societies.

Moreover, just as the lecture played a central role in embedding patriarchy in modern nation states, so its role in constructing imperial ideologies should not be underestimated. We can consider for instance the History tripos at

³³ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (1996).

³⁴ Klinge, 'On Teachers', 127.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁶ Asa Briggs, 'History and the Social Sciences', in *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. Rüegg, 459–91, at 467.

Cambridge, inaugurated in 1873. Only in 1897 was the first essential course even in European history introduced to the degree, which speaks volumes about the extent to which the construction of national identities of exceptionalism was an essential part of the professionalisation of the discipline.³⁷ In time, reforms of the History syllabus would incorporate the wider world through the lens of the expansion of Europe, but there was no sense that it could be included as a field of study on its own merits. Meanwhile, historians were becoming public figures, as the role of the public lecture grew and historians developed a growing presence in the burgeoning print media, and in a role as public speakers to a general audience.³⁸ Where Chairs were established in non-European history, they fell largely within the frame of imperial history: thus what mattered to European societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not to attend lectures which might expand their grasp of world history and culture, but to listen to expositions of myths of national and imperial exceptionalism.

In this sense, we can see that the great era of the creation of civic publics, from the start of the nineteenth century through the first third of the twentieth century, saw the lecture playing several key roles. It helped to build publics, and a sense of a shared public sphere which went far beyond the pre-existing hierarchies of aristocracy, church, and state. This was through the way in which the lecture hall was a space in which all could meet, and discuss – and through the physical experience of that proximity, and observation of the embodied performance of the lecturer. As we have seen this evening, this was not however a new phenomenon, but rather a continuity of a long global history of the social status and awakening power ascribed to the oratorical performance.

On the other hand, the nineteenth-century lecture was deeply connected to the establishment of a canon which was constructing gendered hierarchies and ethnocentrism. And there was a sense in which this too represented the continuity of a long tradition. The mythic had not departed the lecture with the rise of so-called scientific history: it was in fact very much alive. In the twentieth century, the lecture would prove to be a malleable form, that would be deployed by those marginalised in these hierarchies, as female and colonised subjects talked back.

As is widely known, the early twentieth century saw the dawn of the movement of women's suffrage, and naturally the lecture was a key element of this movement. In 1908, Edith Morley became the first female professor in a British university, as professor of English at Reading.³⁹ Similar changes were taking place across Europe. In Spain, for instance, a change to the law in 1910 allowed women to be appointed as university professors. Shortly afterwards the writer Emilia Pardo Bazán was appointed a lecturer on the Ph.D. programme at the University of Madrid, and such movements spread also around the continent.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 469–70.

³⁸ Klinge, 'On Teachers', 143.

³⁹ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/celebrating-legacy-of-englands-first-female-professor>.

⁴⁰ Consuelo Flecha-García, 'The First Female Lecturers at Spanish Universities', *International Journal of the History of Education*, 56 (2020), 769–86.

For the first time, the power of women's voices was institutionalised and given the authority that they had long been demanding. As many will know, this gave expression to a dynamic which was as old as human society itself. In *The Exaltation of Inanna*, one of the earliest of all surviving poems, from 2300 BCE, the priestess Enheduanna from Mesopotamia spoke thus:

Truly I entered the cloister at your command.
 I the priestess I Enheduanna
 carried the basket intoned the paean
 but now I'm consigned to the leper's ward.⁴¹

The power of women's writings to challenge patriarchal voices recurred throughout the ages in text, as with Sor Juana de la Cruz's evisceration of her confessor Father António Núñez de Miranda in early eighteenth-century Mexico:

Of what envy am I not the target? Of what malice am I not the object?
 What actions do I take without fear? What word do I speak without misgiving? Women feel that men surpass them, and that I seem to place myself on a level with men; some wish that I did not know so much; others say that I ought to know more to merit such applause ... What else can I say or instance? – for even having a reasonably good handwriting has caused me worrisome and lengthy persecution, for no reason other than they said it looked like a man's writing, and that it was not proper, whereupon they forced me to deform it purposely, and of this the entire community is witness; all of which should not be the subject for a letter but for many copious volumes.⁴²

Politically, women had held power at various times and places, but as I have argued for the West African context in *A Fistful of Shells*, in the early nineteenth century this power was eroded by the twin vectors of patriarchal Christian missionary movements and the renewed power of the Salafiya revival movement that had emerged in Arabia in the eighteenth century.⁴³ In Britain, as we have seen, the public space and the continuation of the religious patriarchal framework saw an accentuation of a similar pattern of the erosion of women's power. Finally, in the early twentieth century, a line was marked in the sand.

At Reading, Professor Morley became closely involved in the women's suffrage movement, in the years following the award of her Chair. It was in these years that lectures and speeches became a key element of the movement – at once broadening and subverting the patriarchal public space which had been the province of the lecture in the nineteenth century. In 1913, Emmeline

⁴¹ [https://babylonian-collection.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Hallo_Van%20Dijk%20\(1968\)%20-%20Exaltation%20of%20Inanna_YNER%203.pdf](https://babylonian-collection.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Hallo_Van%20Dijk%20(1968)%20-%20Exaltation%20of%20Inanna_YNER%203.pdf).

⁴² Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana, or the Traps of Faith*, trans. Margaret Sayer Peden (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 496.

⁴³ Green, *A Fistful of Shells*, ch. 11.

Pankhurst gave a famous lecture at Hartford, Connecticut, entitled 'Freedom or Death', which showed the cause for women's suffrage in the starker terms. But this was just a part of the extraordinary role of lectures and speeches in the suffrage movement, and Pankhurst's work was prefigured by American pioneer lecturers such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Ida B. Wells who spoke widely in the later nineteenth century.⁴⁴

As opportunities for women expanded in societies, and the place of women's speech became further embedded, History as a field grew to encompass the study of gender – though this would take many decades to be fully realised. The same was true of anticolonial speech. With the rise of anticolonial movements and their growing power in the years after the end of the Second World War, anticolonial oratory became a powerful element of the historical lecture.

The independence of Ghana in 1957 provides a good illustration of this. Leading African American intellectuals and activists including W. E. B Du Bois and the young Maya Angelou moved to Accra, which became a centre for the development of Afrocentric philosophies and pan-Africanism.⁴⁵ Angelou would later draw on her experiences as she became one of the best-known orators in American public life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In his lecture inaugurating the new Centre for African Studies at the University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah made clear how much this heritage and discussion played a part in the formulation of the ideas that drove the new Centre, and the community that was growing up around it:

First and foremost, I would emphasise the need for a reinterpretation of our past ... We have to recognize frankly that African Studies, in the form in which they have been developed in the universities and centres of learning in the West ... still to some extent remain under the shadow of colonial ideologies and mentality ... [T]he history, culture and institutions, languages and arts of Ghana and of Africa [should be studied] in new African centred ways.⁴⁶

As we can see, historical elements were often embedded into the context and content of these lectures. Two years after Ghana's independence, Fidel Castro led the revolution in Cuba in 1959. His success led to the institutionalisation of the Castro lecture, which went with the trademark oratorical stamina of a leader whose 26 September 1960 speech at the United Nations of 4 hours and 29 minutes remains the longest ever recorded in the institution's history.⁴⁷ Castro's ringing tones and declamatory style entranced audiences with a

⁴⁴ See <https://dianavroeginday.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/diana-vroeginday-text-image-final1.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, 2006).

⁴⁶ Kwame Nkrumah, *The African Genius: Speech Delivered by Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah at the Opening of the Institute of African Studies, 25th October 1963* (Accra, 1963), 2–3.

⁴⁷ <https://ask.un.org/faq/37127>.

hallucinatory power; but the contents often related to history, the history of slavery, the contribution of Africa and Africans to Cuban society, and the systemic racism which had excluded that reality. It was indeed because of that history that Cuba played such a key role in decolonisation movements in Angola and Guinea-Bissau, following the famous Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966.⁴⁸

One of the attendees at the Tricontinental Conference was Amílcar Cabral, leader of the PAICV, the anticolonial movement in the Portuguese colonies of Cabo Verde and Guinea-Bissau. As Portugal refused to decolonise in the manner of Belgium, France and the UK, Cabral became a figurehead of the global anticolonial movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. He lectured widely across the world, and in these lectures the cultural and historical framework of the Portuguese colonial reality was placed side by side with his movement's anti-colonial struggle.⁴⁹

Another leading anticolonial orator in this era was Walter Rodney, the Guyanese historian who completed his Ph.D. at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in the late 1960s. After this, Rodney moved to teach at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, and it was in Tanzania that he wrote the now classic book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, published in 1972.⁵⁰ Throughout the rest of the decade, Rodney became a speaker in high demand, whether at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica or as an invited speaker on American campuses at the height of the discussions surrounding the Vietnam War in the 1970s. Rodney was a historian par excellence, whose powerful evocations of history as part of the continuity of global struggles against imperialism and racism were hugely popular.

Thus the twentieth century saw the lecture as an oral form change in its social role. Instead of embedding hierarchies of gender and ethnocentrism, it was deployed by many to challenge those hierarchies. Given the place of the oral form in validating text, as we have seen, this was also fundamental in breaking down the discipline of History so that it no longer focused on the myths of nation and empire. Moreover, these challenges did not simply emerge because of the content of those lectures, but because of the presence of the lecturers and their audiences on campuses. The physical space of the lecture hall became one which itself could challenge the authorities and hierarchies which prefigured them.

However, not everyone responded positively to these challenges, and as we shall now see in the concluding part of this lecture, the rise of remote technologies has made it easier to place such challenges 'out of sight, out of mind'.

Two of the figures we have just discussed passed away during the era which saw the dawn of neoliberalism. Amílcar Cabral was assassinated in Conakry in 1973, and Walter Rodney in Georgetown in 1981. The 1980s saw the

⁴⁸ See e.g. Aditya Nigam, 'Fidel and the Tricontinental Imagination', *Cultural Critique*, 98 (2018), 320–3.

⁴⁹ António Tomás, *Amílcar Cabral: The Life of a Reluctant Nationalist* (2021).

⁵⁰ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London and Dar-es-Salaam, 1972).

ineluctable rise of computing technology, and the rise of computing platforms, which brings us to the present day.

Some will of course have noticed that this lecture was billed as dealing with the past, present and future of the lecture – and perhaps I have not got all that long left, therefore, to address two-thirds of the contents. I am a historian after all. But when we come to the question of the lecture, the present and the future are inevitably conjoined through the experience of the pandemic, and the accelerated use of the digital technologies.

As we have seen, the lecture has a very long and in some ways a universal history, one which connects many different cultures and their traditions of textual learning, oral performance and social renewal. During the 1980s and 1990s, some scholars of education such as Diana Laurillard took a Whiggish approach to the form, and saw it as an outdated and antiquated form of transmission of information, one which was being superseded through the new technologies then emerging.⁵¹ By the turn of the millennium, some scholars, for instance the art historian Robert Nelson, recognised already that these technologies might change the form of the lecture permanently.⁵² Advocates of new online models saw the lecture as an antiquated form now effectively being replaced by new media and the audiovisual experience which that could provide; and yet, as Norm Friesen has noted, in spite of all the discussion around this, the reality on the ground remained different until the pandemic, with the old lecture hall circuit stubbornly enduring.⁵³

This would place the modern history of the lecture as part of a continuity. To be sure, there are continuities. But there are also ruptures.

We can start with the work of Laurillard. Laurillard argued that the lecture was indeed a residue of ancient cultures of orality – as we have seen this evening. However this was for her a kind of atavistic throwback to residual orality in a world where text was the most efficient mode of communication.⁵⁴ And yet as we have seen this evening, this kind of privileging of text over orality derives from nineteenth-century cultures of patriarchy and ethnocentrism. It assumes that the purpose of the lecture is to provide information, rather than understanding it as part of a performance – the performance of knowledge and what it may mean, and the tics which may make that memorable. Laurillard's approach also follows a decidedly Whiggish ideology of human 'improvement' over time. As a historian, one of the things that strikes me more and more is just how similar human behaviour is over time – so the liberal ideal of human progress is not one which to me seems grounded wholly in reality. So rather than progress, I do indeed see some kind of rupture, and one which is worth exploring.

⁵¹ Diana Laurillard, *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Approach for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies* (1993).

⁵² Robert S. Nelson, 'The Slide Lecture, or the Work of Art History in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (2000), 414–34.

⁵³ Norm Friesen, 'A Brief History of the Lecture: A Multi-media Analysis', *Medien Pädagogik*, 24 (2014), 136–153, at 136.

⁵⁴ Laurillard, *Rethinking University Teaching*, 93.

Some might argue that the rupture lies in the relationship of the lecture to capital. The new online format for many lectures is after all deeply connected to technologies which both accumulate capital and increase social inequalities. In a new book, *Pandemic Response and the Cost of Lockdowns*, the scholar of inclusive artificial intelligence Mark Wong makes clear how far the turn to online has exacerbated inequalities during the pandemic, and the means through which this has been achieved. As Wong notes, algorithmic harm has been shown by many scholars to affect the ‘people who are most marginalised in society’.⁵⁵ During the pandemic, the turn to online has radically increased inequalities through the algorithmic harms produced by the very use of these digital platforms. Wong explains:

The vast amount of new data being collected by online platforms, data processes, and AI that we encounter as part of our everyday interactions in the pandemic is unfair and unjust. By using these platforms and services more intensively during the pandemic, people are trading in their data, or more accurately, the *datafication* of their habits and behaviours, to these platforms – free of charge or at an inverted cost to themselves. More users, across the world, are essentially turning into free labour to generate the data that data-driven innovation mines, sells, trains AI, and generates huge profits from. This is a form of exploitative global operation termed *data extractivism*.

Thus the use of online platforms for the delivery of lectures such as this is part of the process of massively increased inequality that has been associated with the response to the pandemic. By giving online lectures and attending them, we are directly increasing inequalities, and stoking the massive increase in wealth which digital entrepreneurs such as Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg have accumulated during the pandemic. Clearly, if we are serious about addressing the massive inequalities in society, we should not participate in online lectures, and indeed should reduce our online activity in many ways.

And yet, some might argue that the role of lectures in accumulating capital may not be the complete rupture that it appears. The expansion of the lecture in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century public sphere was part of the explosion of what historians call print capitalism. As Matti Klinge puts it of late nineteenth-century Germany, ‘Not for the first or last time, academic teaching and research, universities and professors, were seen as tools in the general economic and production process.’⁵⁶ Given the role of the lecture in publications, as we have seen, and the place of emerging technologies in creating modern capitalism in the early twentieth century, one cannot say that the lecture sat apart from this process in that era.

⁵⁵ Mark Wong, ‘Digital Society, Algorithmic Harm, and the Pandemic Response’, in *Pandemic Response and the Cost of Lockdowns: Global Debates from Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Peter Sutoris, Sinéad Murphy, Aleida Mendes Borges and Yossi Nehushstan (2018).

⁵⁶ Klinge, ‘On Teachers’, 135.

Nevertheless, I would argue that there is indeed a distinctive new element in the relation of the Zoom lecture to capital. The production of data about people's online habits is now a direct tool for digital marketing and the production of online profits. It is therefore directly a part of the productive process for modern capital, in a way in which the oral performance in an auditorium never was. Its online presence connects it also to the major forms of capital accumulation in the twenty-first century, whereas in the era of print capitalism accumulation was connected more directly to natural resources. Thus there is a clear difference in the role of the online lecture in the production of capital and inequality today – one where it has been drawn directly into the process of capital production and thereby the enhancement of inequalities.

Another element of rupture might be seen in the form of technology. And yet as we have seen this evening, the history of the lecture is deeply connected to the ability to be conversant with and manipulate the latest technologies. In the monasteries of medieval Europe and Asia this was connected to the technologies of writing, and later of printing. In our era, it is related to the digital technologies of production. And hence what is being reinscribed through the Zoom lecture is not a new relationship between human beings and the world but a different manifestation of it.

These new technologies produce what is deemed to be knowledge, just as book-learning did in the past. However, whereas it is knowledge of books and literature which attests to the lecturer's prowess, this element is now accompanied by their skill in technical wizardry. The nature of expertise changes, and with it the nature of the academic, public and scholarly communities which historically have been formed.

Beyond technology, what changes is the relationship of the production of knowledge to the lecture. This is reinscribed in the relationship of human subjects to the objects which they perceive – and what changes, as Marshall McLuhan might have put it, is the medium and thus the message. The knowledge created remains mediated by human technologies, just as it did in the past with text; and yet it is still unable to bridge the gulf between human subjects and the world around them which is the origin of the quest for knowledge, and which yet seems to grow with each new medium devised to bridge it. Far from making knowledge transmission accessible, it becomes more alienating, remote – and irrelevant. However much we may record and capture images of the world and of our engagement with it, and try to find new meaning in these fragments, the gulf remains, and is even expanded.

Beyond capital or technology, wherein lies the transformation of the modern lecture as it has moved online? I will close this lecture this evening with the proposition that this transformation is in the nature of the human experience. As we have seen, physicality and the physical space has an important part to play in the history of the lecture – and was seen by Plato to have an important role in the process of education itself. This physicality was true of the collective spaces in which epics of the past were performed by griots in West Africa, bards in Denmark, or at the Olympic Games at which Herodotus may have spoken. But it was also true in the packed lecture halls which

came to hear Emmeline Pankhurst, Walter Rodney and Amílcar Cabral. The shared physical experience brought people together, whatever their social class. It was one which was more likely to produce commitment, energy, life-long friendships, relationships – and change.

Certainly, the online space also provokes huge change, as we have seen in the past twenty years. But it is a form of change which is privatised, as the public sphere retreats from its role as a provider of shared spaces and this responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the private citizen, whatever their means – in this sense closely related to the logical praxis of the neoliberal capitalist retreat from the state as a provider of public goods. The quality of experience is privatised as it does not take place in a shared physical space, but in a privatised personal space which is inevitably qualitatively present, even if apparently absent. I am speaking this evening from my living room, which is reasonably comfortable, and provides the space that someone who has been far too lucky in their career, as I have, might be expected to have: the common space which is shared is however a virtual one, and class and historical inequalities now structure the way in which people are listening – or sleeping – alongside whatever I have to say.

Another change in the quality of the experience is that it becomes more homogeneous. Whereas the physical act of attending a lecture, in an auditorium, is qualitatively different to many other forms of human experience, the same cannot be said of the online lecture. As we spend more time online, interacting with computers, the lecture becomes just another mode of interacting with the machine's audiovisual potential. This offers an experience which is ultimately controlled by the computer's mechanical structure and not by whatever the speaker may have to say, and the ways in which the audience may respond – as we all discover when 'the technology goes wrong'.

Others will respond that the online lecture is a more democratic mode of participation, since it is open to many more people who could not otherwise attend. This is of course true. Yet as we have seen this evening, the physical space of the lecture hall in the twentieth century was a principal conduit which opened the way to social change. This was a mode of delivery which worked. Thus far, the online replacement has achieved the mass enrichment of a few people, which cannot be to the long-term benefit of social and human progress – it's not a good start, or a framework which at the moment suggests that it can have the same beneficial ends.

Nor am I alone in holding this view, it would appear, since shares in Zoom have fallen 80 per cent since its 2020 peak,⁵⁷ as people – as we so often hear these days – 'have had enough of Zoom'. Thus it could be that the future of the lecture is not as online as its evangelists have been promising for the past three decades or more. And this may be because, I have suggested here this evening, they have not understood the role of the lecture: this is not just to provide information, but to provide a shared social space and a performance wherein knowledge and its performance becomes memorable.

⁵⁷ <https://www.barrons.com/articles/zoom-stock-growth-downgrade-51646244535>.

I would conclude by suggesting that, if we want to understand ourselves as human beings and our relationship with societies, we have to attend not only to how to interact with changes, but also how to safeguard the core of what has produced healthy societies in human history until now. In sum my aim this evening has been to furnish just a small part of what Herodotus averred to be his aim at the opening of the *Histories* that were at length set down from the oral to the print form:

Herodotus, from Halicarnassus, here displays his enquiries, that human achievement may be spared the ravages of time, and that everything great and astounding, and all the glory of those exploits ... be kept alive.⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ Herodotus, *Histories*, 3.