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WHERE DOES THE WEST END?
ON WRITING HISTORY, CATCHING UP, AND SELF-AWARENESS[1]

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After the political changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, East Central European societies started 'returning to Europe' or 'reverting to the normal state of affairs', as did the historical sciences in these countries. In historiography, this did not only entail a return to a plurality of methodologies, but also institutions and journals. This was considered to set also the Czech humanities on the road to being 'comparable' or 'competitive', at least on the European stage. This contribution argues that, three decades after the abovementioned changes, those expectations have only been met to a limited extent. The hypothetically free market of ideas and concepts appears to have sustained, or even deepened, various economic and cultural inequalities. Moreover, the lack of any supranational public institutions and publication platforms leads to serious doubt over equal access to this playing field. Historiography is not a universalist science; that fact holds not only from the perspective of 'Third World' countries, as demonstrated by post-colonial criticism, but also in relation to Eastern and Central Europe. This article does not see strategic essentialism, placing the specific experience of the East Central European countries above historiographic standards and values, as a solution. Instead, it argues that the way out of the current situation demands that we confront the various epistemological and even 'operational' assumptions and starting points of any historiography from a variety of perspectives, even where that involves uncomfortable self-awareness.

Keywords: history writing; inequalities in research; (non-western) Europe; postcolonial criticism

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In history, unlike in other social sciences and especially cultural and social anthropology, an immediate reflection upon one's own research activities and scientific work in general is not part of the common 'toolbox' of its practitioners. Unlike anthropologists, for instance, historians generally do not feel they ought to question whether their encounters with people as objects of their research are meetings among equals.[2] They do not feel the need to examine what their research position with respect to those people actually is. The past may have been created by people – and people constantly interpret and reinterpret it – but it also tends to be perceived as a finished and immutable object, even among academics. With the exception of contemporary and oral history, historiography does not deal with people in the sense in which sociology, sociocultural anthropology, or some types of political science do. As a result, one could even challenge the assumption that historiography is a social science at all.

Although the kind of (self)reflection described above is not usually part of their individual research projects or presentations – these maintain an objectivistic tone, i.e., they are presented as independent of the researchers' own position – historians nonetheless do think about their occupation and the discipline they practice. Leaving aside the feedback which historiography receives from the review sections of various journals (and dismissing the widely observed but still little analysed decline of the Czech reviewing culture), the traditional means of critical reflection is the history of historiography, which, from a greater or lesser distance, demonstrates and analyses the cultural, political and power-related contexts of history writing. Another tool, less traditional within the Czech context, is found in the theory (and methodology) of historiography. If we were to ask what Czech historiography is investigating these days, and why, there are texts we could turn to and it is no coincidence that in many cases those texts were written by scholars linked to this journal.

An important stimulus for thinking about historiographic approaches, methods, subject choices, and the form of research outputs, not least in connection to their institutional settings, financing, and the international position of Czech

2 Cf. PAVEL BARŠA, *Konstruktivismus a politika identity* [Constructivism and Identity Politics], http://www.antropoweb.cz/cs/konstruktivismus-a-politika-identity (accessed on 14 September 2020).

historiography , was provided by the 7th historians' congress in Hradec Králové in September 1999. The congress led to intense discussions;[3] however, when we look at the two decades that followed, its importance as a milestone in post-November 1989 Czech historiography should not be overrated. I was present at the congress as a young researcher, at the beginning of my professional career. I have not subsequently participated in any such meetings, which are far from common in most fields, and although it might seem a logical step, this text is not intended as a personal summary of my professional activities 'since the Hradec congress'. Nevertheless, it does contain some personal reflections: from the position of a participating observer or an observing participant, I focus on the relationship between 'small' Czech historiography and 'big' historiographies abroad in recent decades, and how that relationship has been discussed and perceived in the Czech environment.

Within this distinct area, I am especially interested in ideas regarding the backwardness or forwardness, or perhaps progressiveness or traditionality, of particular directions in historiography or entire historiographies as defined by language, culture, or state. This article could thus contribute to a discussion regarding the extent to which historiographies – unlike natural or technical sciences – are fundamentally 'national', that is, linked to a particular sociocultural or linguistic space. I shall also ask after the origins, nature, and power-related conditions of the spread of methodological changes ('innovations') within the historiographic field. I wish to draw attention to the nature of the inequalities and 'backwardness' of the Czech historiography in particular, which were often articulated in the 1990s, and explore whether, and if so how, this unequal state of affairs might have been undone or overcome, and what role 'overcoming backwardness' plays within that historiography. These questions were inspired by a passage from one of the few texts by Dipesh Chakrabarty that have been translated into Czech, namely his 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History' (1992). Simply replace 'Europe' with 'Western Europe' here:

'That Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge itself becomes obvious in a highly ordinary way. There are at least two everyday symptoms of the subalternity of non-Western, third-world histories. Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate. Whether it is an Edward Thompson, a Le Roy Ladurie, a George Duby, a Carlo Ginzberg [correctly: Ginzburg], a Lawrence

3 Papers presented at the congress and subsequent discussions can be accessed at http://www.clavmon.cz/archiv/ (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Stone, a Robert Darnton, or a Natalie Davis – to take but a few names at random from our contemporary world – the "greats" and the models of the historian's enterprise are always at least culturally "European". "They" produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that "we" cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level without taking the risk of appearing "old-fashioned" or "outdated".'[4]

Returning to the 'normal' state of affairs

In his critical contribution at the abovementioned 7th congress of historians in 1999, Martin Nodl used the phrase 'bohemica non leguntur' to refer to situations in which, due to their ignorance of the Czech language, international authors never find out that their work is judged disproportionately more severely than works by domestic authors in Czech reviews. On the Czech scene, this 'creates a false impression that Czech historiography operates on a qualitatively identical, indeed in most cases even higher level, than current historiography abroad'. At the end of his contribution, Nodl urged young researchers to produce 'conceptually rich works, based on stimulating interpretation, which would at least touch the higher standards of contemporary West European historical science'.[5]

Twenty years later, Nodl observed somewhat bitterly that works by Czech authors, even those made available in the major European languages, are not registered or reflected upon abroad and do not form part of the European historiography. In other words, 'bohemica non leguntur'.[6] In this respect Nodl, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, concurred with Jaroslav Pánek's observation about a decade earlier, in 2011, that 'Czech historiography as a phenomenon so far remains outside Western assessors' field of vision'.[7] Pánek, however, speaks of Czech historiography as synonymous with the historiography of Bohemia, which implies that what he means is historiography as defined by its subject matter, the Bohe-

4 DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, *Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?*, Representations 10/1992, no. 37, pp. 1–26, here p. 2.

5 Newly reprinted as MARTIN NODL, *Krize české historiografie aneb minulost, která chce být zapomenuta* [The Crisis of Czech Historiography: The Past That Wants To Be Forgotten], in: Týž, Na vlnách dějin. Minulost – přítomnost – budoucnost českého dějepisectví, Praha 2020, pp. 151–161, here pp. 160–161.

6 MARTIN NODL, *Předmluva a poděkování* [Preface and Acknowledgements], in: Na vlnách dějin, p. 10.

7 JAROSLAV PÁNEK, *Česká historiografie a svět* [Czech Historiography and the World], Zpravodaj Historického klubu 22/2011, no. 1–2, pp. 37–51, here p. 39.

mian Lands. (Jan Horský, on the other hand, objects to the claim that 'Czech history' considered in such a theory-free way could form a subject of scientific enquiry.[8]) In the following, I use the term 'Czech historical science' to mean historiography produced at institutions in the Czech Republic, that is, written by authors who work in these institutions, and to a certain extent also academic work that is presented primarily in Czech.

The general claim that Czech historiography is invisible beyond the sphere of the Czech language might be challenged on the grounds that various Czech authors' works clearly are quoted and referenced abroad and it would be relatively easy to find out and assess what kinds of publications these citations appear in, and in what contexts. Here, however, it may be useful to differentiate between works by individuals affiliated with Czech institutions and research that is supported and systematically conducted in the Czech Republic. Both Nodl and Pánek were apparently referring to the invisibility of Czech historiography as an institutional whole, resulting from a general lack of longer-term research, 'schools', and paradigms or concepts that originate in the Czech environment and go on to attract international attention.

The notion that, after the restoration of international contact in the 1990s, Czech historiography should have achieved a level of quality comparable with that of historiography in Western countries, was closely linked in these discussions with the reception of Czech historiographic works beyond the borders of the Czech Republic. The assumption was that Czech historiography would only be accepted as an equal partner once it had caught up, adopted the methodological 'toolbox' of West European research, and 'learnt its language'. Historiography in the Czech Republic and other Central and East European countries thus set out to 'catch up', or rather resumed that approach, since according to Václav Smyčka the 'asymmetric model' of phase delay had already characterised nascent Czech scholarship during the Enlightenment.[9] On the situation of post-Communist historiographies, Sorin Antohi says – in line with Ivan Krastev's and Stephen Holmes' observations on a more general political level – that after

8 JAN HORSKÝ, *Teorie jako konstitutivní rys vědeckosti a jejich místo* v českém *dějepisectví* [Theories as a Constitutive Feature of Scientificity and Their Place in Czech Historiography], Dějiny–Teorie–Kritika 8/2011, pp. 311–328, here p. 327.

9 Cf. VÁCLAV SMYČKA, *Achilles a želva. Osvícenské narativy pokroku a opoždění* [Achilles and the Tortoise. Enlightenment Narratives of Progress and Backwardness], Dějiny–Teorie–Kritika 12/2015, pp. 202–219, here for instance p. 205. Enlightenment thinkers' orientalist views of Eastern Europe as backward in the civilising project are analysed by LARRY WOLFF, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilisation on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994, e.g., p. 360.

1989/1990, 'catching up' or imitation was the only way to go for East Europeans. Persisting in the development of their own specific, original experience was not seen as a feasible option.[10] Let us note, however, that one could hardly have expected such 'postcolonial' insistence on own experience to stand strong against a dominant social system at a point when that new system was only just becoming established while the previously 'own' system was collapsing and discredited.

Nevertheless, the move to restore a 'normal' state of affairs in Czech historiography, as well as in the humanities and social sciences more broadly, did not only manifest itself in terms of desirable efforts to reincorporate local scholarship into contemporary European and worldwide contexts, i.e. as a step forwards, but also to some extent as a step backwards, which paradoxically took the form of a reversion to 'own experience'. This meant a new focus on local authors, directions, and texts that had been more or less excluded from official historiography during 1948–1989, when the field had been authoritatively dominated by historic materialism, and on those that had been marginalised due to their incompatibility with this ideology.[11] Within this context, we can also identify a specific liminal group consisting of formerly Marxist historians of earlier periods – such as Josef Macek and František Graus – who had emigrated and had been writing abroad but, unlike historians of recent history, did not become part of the Western historiography of East European history. After 1989, these scholars were viewed as methodological innovators.[12]

The process of 'catching up' after 1989 was driven by the notion of a single (European or worldwide?) historiography with which Czech historiography had been forced to cut its ties. (Notwithstanding the image of an academic Iron Curtain, Czechoslovak historiography did not suffer total international isolation

10 SORIN ANTOHI, *Narratives Unbound: A Brief Introduction to Post-Communist Historical Studies*, in: Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe, (eds.) Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi, Péter Apor, Budapest-New York 2007, p. ix; IVAN KRASTEV, STEPHEN HOLMES, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, London 2020, p. 60.

11 This situation is aptly described in PAVEL KOLÁŘ, MICHAL KOPEČEK, *A Difficult Quest for New Paradigms: Czech Historiography after 1989*, in: Narratives Unbound, pp. 173–248. Dušan Třeštík warned against a return to 'searching for the meaning of Czech history' in the sense of the tradition established by Masaryk and Pekař, noting that it would amount to remaining in one's own 'museum of folk traditions'; see DUŠAN TŘEŠTÍK, *České dějiny a čeští historikové po 17. listopadu* [Czech History and Czech Historians after 17 November], Český časopis historický 88/1990, pp. 106–118, here p. 110.

12 For more on Graus, see MARTIN NODL, *Živá a mrtvá minulost Františka Grause* [František Graus's Living and Dead Past], in: Na vlnách dějin, pp. 229–239. Further cf. BOHUMIL JIROUŠEK, *Josef Macek: Mezi historií a politikou* [Josef Macek: Between Politics and History], Praha 2004, e.g., pp. 66–69, 155–159.

prior to 1989, although it is certainly true that the level of international contact was not as intense as, for example, that between the Polish and French environments.)[13] In the Czech Republic, calls for objectivity and freedom from ideological deformation were heard more loudly but, at the same time, it was implicitly assumed that the historiography we were to return into would, as a science, uphold clear and universal criteria of quality. 'Catching up' or achieving the new 'normal' was also an expression of the expectation that Czech historiography would diversify into a methodologically varied field and, in particular, that it would be influenced by methodological innovations, which would typically be brought in from elsewhere. There was no expectation that the methodological transformation could or should originate on the domestic scene. Metaphorically speaking, it was assumed that 'progress took place elsewhere' and those of us who tried to implant these 'innovations' or new approaches in the Czech environment – albeit clumsily and oftentimes apodictically[14] – frequently met with derision from colleagues, who viewed us as a band of overkeen scouts. It should be noted, though, that the ridicule was not always aimed at the innovations as such but rather their hasty and often merely declaratory or superficial adoption or mere imitation.[15]

When, in 2007, Pavel Kolář and Michal Kopeček wrote that the central academic institutions in the Czech Republic at the time seemed to inhibit 'the reception of new approaches which had appeared in Western historiographies in the 1980s and 1990s', they also noted that new approaches such as cultural

13 For more on the isolation of Czechoslovak historiography before 1989 and the Annales school's influence on it, see JOSEF VÁLKA, *Nejen 60. léta* [Not Only the 1960s], in: Francouzská inspirace pro společenské vědy v českých zemích, (eds.) Pavla Horská, Martin Nodl, Antonín Kostlán, Cahiers du CeFReS 29 May 2010, http://www.cefres.cz/IMG/pdf/valka_2003_nejen_60_leta.pdf, pp. 2–18. For criticism of Válka's overestimation of the influence of the Annales school and French 'nouvelle histoire' on Czech historiography, cf. MARTIN NODL, *Kontinuita a diskontinuita* české *historické vědy* [Continuity and Discontinuity in Czech Historical Science], in: Na vlnách dějin, pp. 163–180, here pp. 178–180 (note 12). For more on Polish historiography's international contacts before 1989 in brief, see MACIEJ GÓRNY, *From the Splendid Past into the Unknown Future: Historical Studies in Poland after 1989*, in: Narratives Unbound, pp. 101–172, here p. 110.

14 Cf. PAVEL HIML, *Kdo musí vědět, kdy byla bitva na Bílé hoře?* [Who Needs to Know When the Battle at White Mountain Took Place?], Dějiny–Teorie–Kritika 1/2004, pp. 94–106.

15 Cf. VÍT VLNAS, *Příběh pohřbeného psa a faráře mazavky. Příspěvek k výzkumu struktury společenských elit raného novověku a jejich rituálů každodennosti* [The Story of the Buried Dog and the Sloshed Priest. A Contribution to Research into the Structure of the Social Elites in the Early Modern Era and Their Everyday Rituals], Marginalia historica. Sborník prací katedry dějin a didaktiky dějepisu Pedagogické fakulty Univerzity Karlovy v Praze 2/1997, pp. 92–104.

history, the history of sexuality, historical anthropology, and gender history had, just as in Western historiographies, first become established in Czech historiography in studies of the Early Modern Era.[16] In my view, that 'introduction of new approaches' seemed desirable within the Czech milieu because it promised a diversification of the field, not merely a replacement of one dominant methodology, which we could call political history or 'positivism', by another, namely 'culturalism' or 'postmodernism'. Although these new directions, especially those endorsing some form of linguistic turn such as discursive analysis, often fundamentally challenged the starting points of existing historiography (the possibility of accessing historical reality in a way other than through texts, for instance) they did not in fact overturn or fundamentally change it, either in the Czech Republic or elsewhere. (One of the few 'minor shake ups' that did arise, although it relates primarily to the concept of everyday life, was the controversy over the revisionist interpretation of the Czechoslovak past in 1948–1989, which has been ongoing ever since the publication of Michal Pullmann's *Konec experimentu* [The End of the Experiment] and was most recently reignited in the summer of 2020.) In any case, we did not witness any paradigm shift.

When talk of the 'introduction' of new historiographic approaches was interpreted as their 'implementation', rather than their 'establishment', it is understandable that such attempts and activities ran into some opposition. 'Implementation' may give the impression that the local historiography is backward and requires 'innovation'. Imported innovations are then naturally subject to criticism as mere imitations or as calculated endorsement of fads and trends in an attempt to compete for meagre academic funding.[17] This idea that the Czech environment and historiography in particular are generally backward (the notion of the 'stale air of the Bohemian basin'[18]) and that there is a need for innovation has been pervasive since the 1990s, both in academic publications and in grant

16 P. KOLÁŘ, M. KOPEČEK, *A Difficult Quest*, p. 180, 187.

17 In reaction to gender history, this argument was also used in the context of Central and Eastern European countries by, e.g., JOAN HOFF, *Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis*, Women's History Review 2/1994, pp. 149–168.

18 DUŠAN TŘESTÍK, *O co skutečně jde v českém dějepisectví* [What Czech Historiography Is Really About], http://www.clavmon.cz/archiv/polemiky/prispevky/trestik3.htm (accessed on 28 December 2020): 'To explain, let us characterise the basic assumptions upon which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the work of the average professional historian – let's say a forty-five-year-old *Dozent* working somewhere to the west of our closed and rather stale Bohemian Basin – is grounded.' (This 'cosmopolitan' example is amusing given the fact that the position of *Dozent* is not particularly widespread to the west of our Bohemian Basin.)

proposals and projects. However, a more detailed analysis of this notion is beyond the scope of this contribution.

Historiography does not merely reflect developments in a society that lies, as it were, outside it. More than in other disciplines, historiographical statements are an integral part of society: historiography legitimises policies, provides material for remembrance, and influences our self-perceptions by providing us with narratives we can relate to. Indeed, it was the greater availability of such narratives and their variety after 1989 – in other words, an increase in the opportunity to gain inspiration from elsewhere – that led to changes in historical science. To use an example from my own research: it has been and continues to be liberating not to have to adopt traditional patterns of interpretation, 'master narratives', which either viewed rural populations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the dependent, possibly rebellious object of nobles' oppression, a not yet self-aware social class, or painted an image of idyllic patriarchal harmony and commitment to the nobility at early modern estates. Historical approaches inspired by social and cultural anthropology are trying to search for the collectively formed and shared meanings of actions in individuals, or social actors in general, and in so doing, give them back a degree of sovereignty over their lives. In Western Europe, this shift of focus, inspired, among other things, by the 'rediscovery' of various new sources and the re-examination of old ones, went hand in hand with the social protests, liberalisation, feminism, and advancing decolonisation that have taken place since the 1960s. In other words, it was driven by factors that only affected countries of the Eastern Bloc to a limited extent.[19] Hence the variety of historiographic approaches resulted, in this context, from an increase in the diversity of voices within contemporary societies. It was driven by a conviction that the 'right to one's own history' is not exclusive to states, nations, or social classes. This applies in gender history, oral history, and postcolonial history even more than in historical anthropology. Once we view methodological plurality in historiography as a reflection of social plurality, of the fact that the function of academic historiography is not only to explain, or even legitimise, the existence of large units such as states or nations, or processes such as modernisation or progress, the historiographic inequality between the East and the West becomes more understandable.

19 For more on the fact that historical anthropology formed in circumstances affected by factors beyond the discipline itself, see for instance PETER BURKE, *What is Cultural History?*, Cambridge-Malden 2008, p. 44.

In my view, this is not only about differences in the level of political plurality on the two sides of the Iron Curtain before 1989 but, more generally, about the presence of political and public demand for a unifying grand narrative in the ethnically and largely also culturally homogeneous Czechoslovak society of the second half of the twentieth century and even the ancillary role that historiography had already taken on under the influence of the Czech national(ist) movement in the nineteenth century. Of course, one cannot deny that, as already mentioned, opportunities for international exchange were limited in 1968–1989 and this was the period during which various movements, such as women's history, gender history, micro-history, or discourse-oriented approaches were starting to develop.

Nevertheless, the assumption (which I shared) that national or citizenship-based perspectives on history would fade away once confronted with a desire for other kinds of self-identification based e.g. on gender or culture – some assisted by historical argument – and to relate to new reference groups when writing history, however, was illusory, or at least only realised in part. After the post-revolutionary diversification within Central and East European historiographies, we seem now to be witnessing a revived interest in grand narratives and symbols shared by large groups.[20] It is as if in reaction to globalisation and a feeling that power is slipping through our fingers, we return our focus to the state and nation: thinking, identifying and living across cultural, linguistic, and state or institutional borders remain the privilege of the cosmopolitan elites. In recent years, we have also observed a tendency in these countries to use historiography to create (and exculpate) a homogeneous national community in debates linked to the Holocaust.[21] Whether a rejection of 'colonial' dominance, with its promise – under the banner of globalisation – to rewrite old identities, modernise society, and interconnect the world into new groups (of consumers), necessarily implies a return to 'old' national contexts and in our case to the national framework in historiography, remains to be seen and we shall return to this question later.

20 I leave aside the possibility that post-1989 historiographic diversity was merely an optical illusion, although this interpretation may find support in the popularity of historical literature and other media based on traditional approaches, such as biographies of famous personalities.

21 Cf. FERENC LACZÓ, *Victims and Traditions. Narratives of Hungarian National History after the Age of Extremes*, in: Of Red Dragons and Evil Spirits. Post-Communist Historiography between Democratization and New Politics of History, (ed.) Oto Luthar, Budapest-New York 2017, pp. 139–158, here pp. 145–146. I am grateful to Mátyás Erdélyi for bringing this text to my attention.

When the bigger players decide

Historiography, if one can speak of it so generically, has changed since the early 1990s. Any reflection upon these past three decades from the Czech perspective is therefore necessarily both simplifying and subjective. After an initial intensification of contacts with the 'developmentally neighbouring' Austrian, German, and French historiographies, Czech academic institutions and the people who constitute them were gradually confronted with a global model of science, whose adoption has also shaped the Czech national evaluation system. Its most prominent demand is that results should be internationally comparable and communicable, in the manner established in the natural and technical sciences. This goes hand in hand with an increased emphasis on specific forms of output, most notably studies published in high impact-factor journals, while monographs written in smaller, regional languages became less valued and reviews written in such languages fell into utter insignificance. Here, I am talking merely about a general tendency: from the perspective of the history of science it would certainly be interesting to analyse which arguments were successfully used by representatives of the humanities who urged the relevant committees and boards to give their disciplines 'special treatment' (such as by creating an index of peer-reviewed Czech journals outside the impact factor rankings, for instance).[22]

I have always endorsed the need to achieve and maintain international comparability and universality in historiography. In other words, I have always been convinced that the quality of a study on, say, re-Catholisation in the seventeenth century or on Božena Němcová (a nineteenth-century Czech writer) is not a priori determined by its author's country of residence or institutional context (and certainly not by the author's language or nationality). At this point, we can only reiterate that academic quality and relevance are not determined by the subject of the work, which is necessarily anchored in a particular geographic and cultural context, but by the questions and issues the work addresses. Those questions and issues, along with the answers proposed, ought to be understandable across borders and thus also comparable. But this is where the situation becomes more complicated than in the sciences.

Among research policies organisers, there is a general assumption that in the natural sciences, the phenomena studied are – to put it simply – culture-

22 For more on the defence of the position of humanities in early twenty-first century in the Czech Academy of Sciences, see PETR VOREL, *Jaroslav Pánek a dějiny raného novověku na přelomu tisíciletí* [Jaroslav Pánek and Early Modern History at the Turn of the Millennium], Český časopis historický 115/2017, pp. 24–45, here p. 42.

-independent and therefore equally accessible to anyone. In historical research, the phenomena studied are more rooted in their social context and so seem to carry their interpretation along with them. Once the researchers are familiar with the cultural or linguistic codes through which these phenomena are mediated in the sources, they find themselves drawn towards the interpretations that are hinted, implied, or suggested by those codes or cultural contexts. Moreover, in historiography, we do not just 'reveal' a past reality. Rather, we assume it or even fabricate it ourselves and international comparability is possible only at some level of abstraction. For instance, in the case of the re-Catholisation of (Central) Europe from the 16th to the 18th centuries, questions about the stability of religious identity in the context of that time, under pressure from those in power, could be seen as 'translatable' into questions about forced conversions in other cultural contexts. But whether that social process is called re-Catholisation, counterreformation, or Catholic reform makes a difference: each of these terms is grounded in a different ideological position and research tradition and, above all, each makes explicit reference to different contexts and circumstances. The social phenomena denoted by these expressions are thus not necessarily identical. An even better-known example of this phenomenon is that of whether we refer to the 'discovery', 'conquest', or 'colonisation' of the Americas.

We need not invoke Aby Warburg's well-known saying that 'God is in the details' to realise that the object of historical research, and in fact of all social sciences research, is constituted by its situatedness, both in contemporary and previous interpretations. This situatedness is not just an 'additive' to some universal processes and phenomena. (Indeed, recent approaches in cultural history have emphasised that past events are unique and cannot be reduced to any 'anthropological constants' or criteria for historical comparison.) But even such universal processes, along with research concepts such as 'modernisation', 'class', or 'individual', imply a particular, European, perspective that is nowadays imprinted onto global historiography as a whole.[23]

Since I mentioned above that the past three decades in Czech academia have been characterised by efforts to achieve historiographic output of internationally comparable quality, let me also add that in the humanities and social sciences, 'quality' may become apparent only from some distance, after a span of time, and moreover that it is – much like in other disciplines – a matter of consen-

23 Dipesh Chakrabarty criticises this kind of historicism exported from Europe; see DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2000.

sus among scholars. Such consensus or evaluation of quality can, however, be achieved only within a community that is institutionally interconnected, communicates (via academic journals), and shares both expectations about what constitutes good academic work and also cultural prerequisites, including a common language. In this respect, it is apparent that historians form a single international academic community to a much lesser degree than, for instance, natural scientists do. And although the individual (national) scientific communities that decide upon quality criteria can be more or less delimited along professional lines, the self-perception of the history community is substantially influenced by the 'general public', to whom the – internationally largely incommensurable – monographs in the field are also addressed.

Any belief that historiography could be a universal or universalist science is further undermined by a number of experiences that have been a noticeable part of the Czech environment since the 1990s – even if we leave aside the Eurocentric nature of the academic system as such or the Eurocentric origins of the concept of the (linear) past as a subject of knowledge. With the notable exceptions of the European University Institute and the Central European University, historiography is not usually practised in non-national or supranational institutions. It is also not written in any non-national language: there is no language in the position that Latin held in the Middle Ages. Bibliometrics and databases dictating the academic quality of journals, as well as open access journals, are not managed by non-profit or public publishing houses or institutions but, in many cases, by private enterprises (much as the credibility of different countries is judged by private ratings agencies).

The criteria for inclusion in such databases, such as transparency and in particular an independent review process, certainly guarantee general quality but they are – and by definition must be – rather formal criteria; peer-review demands and standards vary even among journals with the same 'rating'. Even the editorial policies and strategies adopted by individual journals can differ depending on their status and prestige, consequent excess or lack of submissions, and on the way those submissions are evaluated and selected. These factors are in turn rooted in the tradition of the academic environment in which the journals are established. In a somewhat circular fashion, this brings us to the observation that truly universal and inclusive scholarly history journals are few and far between.

Historiography and its epistemic tools and concepts do, of course, develop but, in my view, it is unsatisfactory to merely note that this takes place in a disorganised and haphazard manner in all (geographic) directions. It is not surprising that, for instance, the Scopus database, operated by the Dutch publishing house Elsevier is dominated by journals from the United States, the United Kingdom,

and The Netherlands, i.e., by journals written primarily in English.[24] From the perspective of research policy in individual countries it is understandable that they rely on such international citation databases when dividing up their available resources; after all, these databases give the impression of being 'universal' even though they do not in fact cover all academic disciplines or responses to publications within them.[25]

In the Czech Republic, after a period in which research policy was largely guided by quantitative criteria, we have only recently begun to witness the advent of a more demanding (and more stressful, where interpersonal relations are concerned) system of evaluation of the quality and contribution of particular outputs, which does not only apply to 'international' research but also within the local environment, including the non-academic sphere.[26] In other words, we are finally moving from counting to reading.

Universalist innovations and postcolonial resistance

My present aim is not to analyse research policy, but it is impossible to separate the way we ourselves view our research activity and publications and the directions in which we develop those from the economic and institutional framework of academic work, historiography included. The latter do not only affect the form and language of our research outputs or of the platforms on which we aim to publish them, but also the subjects and methodology of our research. Should historians, then, who tend to be sensitive to power inequalities in the past, turn their attention to themselves and ask from where, that is, from what journals, universities, and academic environments, innovations in historiography emerge – such as, recently, 'histoire croisée', 'praxeology', or 'post-humanist history' – and what the economic position of these journals and academic environments is?

24 Cf. MOHAMMADAMIN ERFANMANESH, MUZAMMIL TAHIRA, A. ABRIZAH, *The Publication Success of 102 Nations in Scopus and the Performance of their Scopus-indexed Journals*, Publishing Research Quarterly 33/2017, pp. 421–432, here p. 426.

25 For instance, the humanities are almost entirely missing from the Web of Science; cf. UWE JOCHUM, *Die politischen Zahlen der MPDL*, https://uwejochum.github.io/5artikel/2018/02/02/politische-zahlen-mpdl/ (accessed on 29 November 2020). Jochum notes that, for instance, at the time he wrote his article, the Web of Science did not include Jürgen Osterhammel, one of the best-known German historians focused on modern history.

26 Some scholars, such as Martin Wihoda, have critically analysed the new approach to evaluation, known as the Methodology for Evaluating Research Organisations 17+, from the perspective of historiography; https://www.phil.muni.cz/aktuality/prulomovym-historickym-objevem-neni-novy-pramen-ale-jeho-pochopeni (accessed on 31 October 2020).

Considering my own engagement in support of the anthropological approach to history, and the fact that this inspiration came from a historiographically dominant environment, I, too, must ask myself this question.

Time and again, my answer would be that, in the 1990s, my interest in 'non-elite' individuals as actors of history was both met in and inspired by texts produced within (West) German historiography and, through their mediation, various works of Italian microhistory.[27] In their respective countries, however, the researchers who took this approach were not part of the historiographical mainstream. Some scholars, such as Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Aron J. Gurevich, whose works were already accessible in Czechoslovakia before 1989, had drawn attention to how these historical individuals dealt with their world symbolically and perceived it in categories different from our own. It is paradoxical that their works have 'returned' to our environment alongside an interest in social protest (here rendered as Marxist) and its cultural forms, in new – or rather previously unknown – works by Natalie Z. Davis, Robert Darnton, and Carlo Ginzburg (all of whom Dipesh Chakrabarty, quoted above, characterises as 'canonically Western'). We should nevertheless keep in mind that these 'innovations' represent just a small section of historiography and that both in academic journals, on grant agency panels, university research boards, and bookshop shelves, it is the 'grand narratives' of states, countries, religions, or major social changes and their representatives, that dominate.

To provide one more example, demand for historiography to be universalist is also reflected on an institutional level in the way 'general history' features in specific study programmes, but also habilitation and professorship fields and specialisations at universities. This can be viewed – not only in the Czech Republic – as persistence of nineteenth-century categories; on the other hand, there have recently been attempts, even here, to redefine general history and indeed practical debates about the very possibility of writing any 'general' or 'world history' from a particular perspective at all.[28] In a discussion that took place on the pages of this journal, Miroslav Hroch defined this approach to history negatively, as non-national or extranational. He understands general history to mean an 'analysis and explanation of social, economic, or cultural changes that took place

27 Italian microhistory represents an example of a school or approach that emerged from a linguistically smaller and internationally non-dominant environment.

28 Cf. the topic of the May 2019 issue of the journal Dějiny a současnost and, among its other contents, JIŘÍ JANÁČ, JAROSLAV IRA, *Komparace, relace, kontextualizace… České světové dějiny a světové dějiny Česka* [Comparing, Relating, Contextualising … Czech World History and the World History of Czechia], Dějiny a současnost 41/2019, no. 5, pp. 13–15.

in a number of countries, synchronically or non-synchronically'.[29] His debating partners, Miloš Havelka and Jan Horský, think of general history in terms of a general epistemic problem not bound to a particular subject. Yet both of these definitions would fit almost any history, including microhistories, which are usually linked to some more general issue. In other words, all historiography can be 'general' in this sense. I myself have tended to reject the traditional dichotomy between 'national' and 'general' history for a similar reason – if we investigate social resistance or, more generally, modes of coexistence in the formally hierarchical premodern European society, the generality and communicability of that investigation is determined by our formulation of the problem and not by its geographic scope or the frequency of this phenomenon within a particular area. (Though, of course, our formulation of the subject is based on the state of general historical knowledge and on the general idea of historical development or changeability.) Still, to some extent this dichotomy seems to persist. Research (and scholars) who situate themselves within general history – although in many cases, all this means is that they either apply a comparative approach or investigate a country other than their own – seem to come closer to producing universal and globally applicable works. From this perspective, 'National' or 'Czech' history is understood as merely providing a partial example of general phenomena and processes, and therefore as less deserving of international attention.

Postcolonial criticism, on the other hand, views the formulation of problems, the notion of general historical changes, and the tools needed to investigate them, as much less universal than they claim to be. It considers that these are grounded upon modern European concepts such as linearity of development, individual emancipation, specific rationalism, citizenship, and statehood. The seemingly inevitable temporal sequence of these concepts is something we could call 'historism', which is a cornerstone of the practice of history as an academic discipline. It seems desirable, if not downright necessary, to adopt these concepts if one wants to overcome backwardness and make progress. This, in a sense, applies also to the methodologies, which – starting with the mythical 'positivism' – have apparently succeeded each other, as indeed the very terms 'methodological innovation' or 'modernisation' seem to imply.

29 MIROSLAV HROCH, *Obecné, světové, globální dějiny?* [General, World, or Global History?], Dějiny–Teorie–Kritika 16/2019, pp. 270–274, here 272–273. History is spontaneously defined as 'national' – in our case 'Czech' – by its subject matter, which as noted above does not constitute its scientific nature. One could, however, also consider the option of defining a history by the audience it is primarily intended for.

But what happens if we reject these concepts, this developmental necessity, and with it the role of one who is permanently trying to catch up? Although I am not familiar with all the responses to Chakrabarty's call for the 'provincialisation' of Europe – which amounts to a denial of general validity and of the desirability of these concepts – one of its consequences is evident: it offers a return to autonomous, local, and (in the case of historiography) mostly national, cultures that resist colonialization or globalisation. My own, implicitly universalist, perspective tempts me to respond, almost automatically, that in terms of scientific knowledge this would be a step backwards. Stanley Bill tries to show how some Polish intellectuals, including Ewa Thompson and Maria Janion, have used the postcolonial rejection of the Enlightenment-inspired necessity of progress to search for authentic 'Polishness' unaffected by external influences, whether those be from the East or more 'progressivist' influences from the West (this quest led some to uncover a pre-Christian Slavic identity). Stanley Bill sees this as an example of postcolonialism's contribution to the essentialisation of particular cultures and the exclusion of all that is 'foreign'.[30] He finds support in the works of authors such as Vivek Chibber, who criticise Chakrabarty's studies for postulating a fundamental difference between the cultures of the East (India) and the West (Europe) and denying any shared features of human behaviour across cultures, such as shared rationality or individuals' efforts to achieve autonomy.[31]

It is, however, paradoxical that such demands for historiography's interpretative schemes to be provincialised or re-localised often recall the premise of other 'innovative' historiographic approaches (such as historical anthropology), which hold that premodern European cultures and actions of their members should not be measured by post-Enlightenment rationalist standards. Martin Müller, too, seems to advocate 'strategic essentialism', that is, refusing to take on a catching-up role, just as he rejects the traditional division into a global North

30 STANLEY BILL, *Seeking the Authentic: Polish Culture and the Nature of Postcolonial Theory*, https://nonsite.org/seeking-the-authentic-polish-culture-and-the-nature-of-postcolonial-theory (accessed on 31 October 2020). The analysis of Ewa Thompson's position and her polemics with Kundera's understanding of Central Europe features prominently in the article by Ondřej Slačálek which deals with the possibilities of transferring the postcolonial concept to the postsocialist intellectual milieu. See, ONDŘEJ SLAČÁLEK, *Postkoloniální střední Evropa? Kunderův „unesený Západ" v zrcadle postkoloniální kritiky* [Postcolonial Central Europe? Kundera's 'Kidnapped West' in the Mirror of Postcolonial Critique], Slovo a smysl 34/2020, pp. 105–130.

31 I did not have Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* at my disposal but he summarised his criticism in an interview entitled 'How Does the Subaltern Speak?', https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/04/how-does-the-subaltern-speak/ (accessed on 31 October 2020).

and South and instead proposes the notion of the 'global East', an alternative concept that would erase the differences between individual countries which aspire to 'being Western'.[32]

Against this, in a debate on the concept of provincialisation of Europe in *History and Theory*, Carola Dietze proposed that history based on modernity as a universal vector or goal, history that distinguishes between advanced, developing, and backward cultures and countries, should be replaced by 'history on equal terms'. In this context, we must be careful not to interpret 'equal terms' as 'equal conditions', since Dietze does not address the conditions in which history is written, received, or takes on meaning. Her proposal is of an epistemological or methodological nature, and consists in a change to the way we think about modernity, its academic treatment, and the attention we pay to historic actors.[33] In my view, any declaratory demand that we perceive history as a single unit, without temporal or spatial gaps or turning points, fails to consider the identity-forming function of history in both its positive and negative senses. It also fails to take into account that history is anchored in the interests of various social groups, including nations, who use narratives about the past to say something about themselves. If we look at the past three decades of Czech historiography, at presentations of the past in museums and elsewhere, and at other projects, it is apparent that the range of groups about which and for whom history is 'made' has broadened and includes groups that are defined by categories other than by their nationality. On the other hand, it seems far from certain that global humanity could constitute such a group, even considering the fast development of communication technologies. Dietze, though, says nothing about how her 'historiography on equal terms' might be practiced.[34]

In conclusion, we must reiterate that the very practice of historiography has clearly pointed out the limitations of such 'equal terms'. Much though it is evident that individual historiographies do not jointly form a single universal sci-

32 MARTIN MÜLLER, *In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South*, Geopolitics 25/2020, pp. 734–755, here p. 744. Müller uses the term 'strategic essentialism' with reference to a notion formulated and later relativised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

33 CAROLA DIETZE, *Toward a History on Equal Terms: A Discussion of 'Provincialising Europe*, History and Theory 47/2008, pp. 69–84, esp. pp. 79–83. Among other things, Dietze proposes that modernity as a 'big concept' should be abandoned or rather fragmented and its manifestations studied anywhere, regardless of traditional dividing lines between advanced and backwards countries, cultures, or areas.

34 Dipesh Chakrabarty responded to Dietze from a different position; cf. DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, *In Defence of "Provincialising Europe". A Response to Carola Dietze*, History and Theory 47/2008, pp. 85–96, for more on 'history on equal terms', see pp. 94–95.

ence in the way the natural sciences do, and that they are also relevant in relation to various specific communities, it is also true that those who drive 'national' research policy impose upon historiography demands in efficiency and excellence that were developed to fit the natural sciences.[35] These demands are presented with the aim of making historiographies more internationally comparable and perhaps even more competitive. In some respects, they thus blur their differences and render them more alike.

The cultural and economic conditions in which the particular historiographies that are confronted with these demands operate are, however, still not equal. They are neither equal to those of the natural sciences in the same country, nor to those of historiographies in other countries. The interconnection of these historiographies via journals, databases, and publishing houses – which are 'international' but in fact rooted in their particular national academic environments – or, more generally, their tendency or even pressure to unify cannot be directly compared to economic or informational globalisation. And yet it is my impression that we are brought face to face on a daily basis, in our work and in the choices we make, with this tendency and find ourselves having to decide how to react to the inequalities that affect us and our work.

What autonomy?

The relatively long period of time it took for this text to take shape resulted from some hesitation and doubt as to whether the problem I saw in the situation of Czech historiography, might be an illusive one and whether it would not lead me to conclude that the only way forward is to resign on comparisons with other historiographies and to enclose ourselves in a sort of national self-satisfaction with our own academic tradition. After all, some colleagues still claim that all we gain from the international scene is a bunch of superficial and short-lived fads; calls for cultural history to return to the time-tested methods of Winter, Zíbrt, or Kalista, scholars of the first half of the twentieth century whose research was based on sound archive work, are heard no more. That certainly does not mean that theories of modernity, such as those proposed by Elias or Foucault, could not be refuted using source materials from early modern Bohemian towns; concrete examples can be brought to falsify any theory. Nor does it preclude the

35 For criticism of the principle of evaluating social sciences and historiography by the same criteria as natural sciences, cf. also PETR ČORNEJ, *Vpřed i* v *kruhu? Proměny české historiografie po roce 1989* [Ahead and Full Circle? Changes in Czech Historiography After 1989], in: Týž, Historici, historiografie a dějepis. Studie, črty, eseje, Praha 2016, pp. 422–439, here p. 438.

possibility that some concepts are adopted simply to increase scholars' chances of publication or speedy promotion.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that concept-free historiography, not anchored in any particular assumptions or starting points, is possible. I also believe that one cannot a priori decide which concepts are relevant or suitable for the Czech context or the past of the Bohemian Lands. The fact that some concepts are able to make headway with various types of audiences, while others are not, is something I see as a clear achievement of the past three decades.

All the authors cited above who have addressed the specific situation of this small historiography after 1989 in principle share this view. Unlike them, perhaps, I do not feel the need to present a 'Czech' view of the 'Czech' or Central European past to the outside world using English-written syntheses.[36] (It would in fact be rather interesting to see how many of our international colleagues see themselves as belonging to a unified 'historical community' within their particular country, which presents itself abroad in a unified fashion.) Ties across historiographies are (also) forged on the basis of methods or methodologies, which is why it is so important to respect methodological variety on the domestic scene. Finally, one thing that would substantially contribute to the comparability and dignity of Czech historical science (and this is something I consider to be a failure on the part of its former and current representatives) is improvement in its domestic economic situation and support: many of my colleagues, even those who are no longer at the start of their careers, still work under unenviable conditions and are forced by their low salaries to take on multiple, concurrent jobs. That in addition to the fact that it is still common practice in the Czech Republic to combine a full-time academic position with work on grant projects – something that is unimaginable and in effect illegal in many 'Western' countries.

A cultural or methodological return to our 'own resources' also makes little sense because there is no original or 'pure' national historiography: open exchange was a leading principle in modern science since its beginnings, even in sciences sometimes explicitly perceived as ancillary and, in the Czech case, as lagging behind their mainly German models. In 2007, Maciej Górny soberly noted that Czech, like Hungarian or Polish, historical science will not produce 'conceptions that would be taken up by foreign researchers: it tends to adopt ideas created abroad'.[37] Although he described Czech historiography as

36 J. PÁNEK, *Česká historiografie a svět*, p. 86.

37 MACIEJ GÓRNY, *Několik úvah o české historiografii po roce 1989* [Some Thoughts on Czech Historiography After 1989], Dějiny–Teorie–Kritika 4/2007, pp. 63–73, here pp. 72–73.

'Western' in the sense of its emancipation from 'patriotic duties' (which seems a little less certain nowadays), he did not think it necessary to compare it only with large West European historiographies. On the contrary, he saw a degree of distinctiveness, if not uniqueness, in its rootedness in the Central or Eastern European context. Central Europe indeed seems a more suitable horizon for Czech historiography, and moreover one that is being gradually institutionalised in the form of inter-university collaboration, scholarships, and journals. Student and researcher exchanges are already taking place within the region. However, even in this case, such activities are defined primarily along subject lines and only secondarily by investigative approach, despite the fact that the latter often addresses the specificity of this region. Methodological innovations still tend not to originate here.[38]

The Central European historiographies all find themselves in similar positions (and, with the exception of Austria, in comparable economic situations) with respect to the abovementioned globalising tendency in academia. Perhaps those of us who work within them are somewhat more sensitive to situations in which 'scientific innovation' results in inequalities or even dominance. As we increasingly use English for mutual communication, we can also be better heard in all places where the term 'Europe' is implicitly used to mean Western Europe. I hope it will not sound too presumptuous, on the back of the rather critical thoughts I have presented, to suggest that after spending such a long time trying to 'catch up', it is time we were more self-confident.

38 M. MÜLLER, *In Search of the Global East*, p. 743, moreover sees attempts to establish a specific Central Europe (and long debates about it) as creating a 'better' and 'more cultivated' East aspiring towards the West, which in effect reconfirms the East–West dichotomy.