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‘I FEEL LIKE I AM A HYBRID MYSELF’

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR PETER BURKE (UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE)

Professor Peter Burke of Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, has been a major influence in shaping cultural history by promoting innovative approaches, expressing a constant desire, or perhaps need, to open history up to neighbouring disciplines, mainly cultural anthropology, sociology and visual studies. This conversation between DTK’s Editor-in-Chief, Veronika Čapská, and Peter Burke was recorded on June 11th 2019 in the welcoming environment of Trinity Hall at the University of Cambridge, where Veronika Čapská held a Visiting Fellowship in 2018–2019. Special thanks are due to DAAD scholar Hanno Balz, who allowed us to conduct the interview in his office. The Covid-19 health crisis and the complications to professional and personal situations that have arisen from it have delayed the publication of this dialogue and turned the process of editing it into a welcome textual and social practice of reconnection at a time when the distance between Prague and Cambridge seemed to be growing ever larger.

1)

Veronika Čapská: Peter, your books and articles have contributed immensely to establishing *Historical Anthropology* as a field of study which systematically strives to connect history with socio-cultural anthropology. When students learn about *Historical Anthropology* today, they often do so on the basis of reading and discussing your texts. In Germany, the scholarly journal *Historische Anthropologie. Kultur. Gesellschaft. Alltag* has been published since 1993, and there have been other signs of institutionalization too, so it seems that *Historical Anthropology* is an established label. At the same time, historians seem less willing to advocate or plead for *Historical Anthropology* today than they were a decade or two ago. What prospects do you see for Historical Anthropology today?

Peter Burke: Its golden age in Britain was in the seventies and the eighties. At that time, it was connected with my old Oxford teacher Keith Thomas (*1933) and with Alan McFarlane (*1941). Alan played an important mediating role as he took two doctorates, one in History and one in Anthropology. He now works here in Cambridge. In France this was the age when Jacques Le Goff (1924–2014) was beginning to talk about *anthropologie historique*. I think it was really the other way round. It was always *histoire anthropologique*. But somehow historical anthropology got established with 'historical' only as the adjective.

In Central Europe historical anthropology may be going stronger than here. I have not looked into the journal *Historische Anthropologie* for quite some time. But it started very well. There has been one major change or success since the time when I and Alan McFarlane first began to pursue history and anthropology. Someone reviewed one of Alan's books about seventeenth-century England and commented on the supposedly very strange references to developments in twentieth century Africa and India, in total incomprehension of the author's purpose. I do not think that would happen now. People are more prepared to move beyond the boundaries of their disciplines today.

And maybe there are still opportunities to do something original in this field, especially if one moves away from the established anthropological subjects, like the ritual or the gift (and I know you have written about gift exchange yourself) into diplomacy, war, anthropology of members of parliament, anthropology of lawyers and even studies of the present and still more studies of the past from that angle. So, I do not think historical anthropology is dead or fading. Many scholars have learnt a bit from it. But it is not in the centre or on the cutting edge in the way that it used to be.

2)

Veronika Čapská: In the last decade a clear rise of interest in the so-called global microhistory or transcultural microhistory has emerged. We might even call it a scholarly debate, with contributors such as Francesca Trivellato, Hans Medick, Dagmar Freist or Giovanni Levi. The journal *Historische Anthropologie* has been one of the central sites for that debate. What do you think of this emerging subfield? Could it be a reassessment or a revitalization of Historical Anthropology?

Peter Burke: It has clearly got something to do with it. But I think this new field owes a lot to recent and contemporary changes. It is a commonplace to say that as the present changes, everybody becomes interested in different things about the past. In an age of cultural globalization and an age of massive migration, people are involved, whether they like it or not, in cultural encounters.

There is going to be more interest in the transnational and we can already see it. And some people do approach the transnational from an anthropological perspective, although not everybody. I became interested in the phenomenon of hybridization. I have written two books about it, first a general one and another when I was invited to give the Natalie Zemon Davis lectures in Budapest and I needed to find a subject quite quickly, so I chose hybridity in the Renaissance. I remembered that Natalie had written some pieces on hybridity herself and so it was nice to find a subject which fits the interests of the person who not only has lectures named after her but makes a point, despite her age, of actually crossing the Atlantic, sitting in the front row and asking good questions. All this in my case.

In my case the subject of cultural hybridity was partly inspired by having spent a fair amount of time in Brazil, having married a Brazilian and mixed languages at home. Brazilian culture is obviously hybridized, not so much with indigenous people because there are so few of them left, but owing to the effects of slavery. More than half Brazilians are partly of African descent. And people who look completely European in the Northeast of Brazil will talk about African culture as 'our' culture. Although that does not mean that Brazilians have not got another foot in traditional European Mediterranean culture. So there the process of hybridization is more obvious than it is here in Britain. But then you come back with those ideas and you see a lot of it here as well. I had not noticed it before, at least not to that degree.

Veronika Čapská: So it changes your perspective?

Peter Burke: Yes. And I feel like I am a hybrid myself. After all, none of my grandparents were born in this country. Two came from the extreme west of Europe, that is Galway, where it has only got the Atlantic west of it. And the others from eastern Europe, from the Russian empire because that's what it was when my grandparents left in the 1880s. So, in a sense, studying European history for me was an attempt to stage a cultural encounter between my grandparents. Although the two pairs of grandparents met every now and then, they did not take much interest in each other.

3)

Veronika Čapská: Would you say that your childhood was under the influence of cross-cultural relations due to this family heritage?

Peter Burke: I felt and still feel first of all European and then British, which means that you do not have to ask me which side I support in the Brexit debate.

Veronika Čapská: I could see that in your book *Exiles and Expatriates in the History of Knowledge*.

Peter Burke: I have always thought it very funny that I have a job teaching European history, which in Britain means excluding British history. Once you talk about the whole of Europe, British examples are as relevant as Polish or Czech ones. Luckily, the universities I have taught in have been places where you can easily subvert the system from within, although on the other side it is almost impossible formally to change it (at least in Oxford and Cambridge). But because in those universities you have got the wonderful system of teaching students one or two at a time, you do not have to make any fuss. I just used to put the anthropology books on the reading list. But I did not say they were anthropology books. I just said 'I think the books on this list will help you write this essay'. And whether they noticed or not they assimilated these new concepts and used them in the essays. Very often very effectively.

Actually, when Bob Scribner and I decided to set up a course called 'Historical Anthropology' the Faculty Board here in Cambridge rejected it twice, but for reasons which (as we knew very well) were not the true reasons. But luckily the Faculty Board changes some of its members every year, so the people who were most against our project came off the Board and were naturally replaced by other people. So the third time we were successful. But then the chair of the Board said to us: 'Yes, you can go ahead, provided there is no theory in it.' We tried not to laugh, said yes and took no notice. Because clearly theory was one of the main reasons for setting the course up. And the students loved it.

4)

Veronika Čapská: Your work is mainly associated with Historical Anthropology but you have written quite a lot on social theory. Where do you see the roots of your interest in social theoreticians and the history research they inspired?

Peter Burke: I have to admit that as I specialized in early modern history at Oxford it took me some time to read the great Marxist classics, both Edward Thompson (1924–1993) and Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), because I was not 'doing' the nineteenth century. But then, when I did read them, I admired both very much. Although I think I am much closer to Eric's style than to Edward's.

There were two books I read at the start. One was *Primitive Rebels* because in a sense Eric was the first British historical anthropologist, even though it was a kind of accident because he was invited by the Department of Anthropology in Manchester to give a lecture, so he focused on presenting history in a way that would appeal to Max Gluckman (1911–1975) and his group. Then the other one, which impressed me immediately, was *The Age of Revolution*. And I read that one when I was preparing the book *Popular Culture*. Eric never told me what he thought about *Popular Culture*, although I suspect that he liked it because just once in his life he sent me a postcard. When I was elected to the British Academy, he wrote this funny postcard which said 'I am not congratulating you I am congratulating the British Academy' which I am very proud of. He would at least have appreciated that I was reading Central and East European sources as well as West European ones and trying to write in such a way as to cover Europe 'from Galway to the Urals'. I did so without using Russian, unfortunately. I was going to learn Russian after Polish but I never finished Polish, so I never began Russian.

5)
Veronika Čapská: Can you share with us your impressions from your stays in Poland before the fall of the Iron Curtain?

Peter Burke: I have visited Poland quite a lot, although not as much as I would have liked to. I have cooperated with a group of historians in Warsaw, the most memorable of whom, for me, was Antoni Mączak (1928–2003). Once, in the early 1980s, he invited me to talk at the Department of History and, given the situation at the time, I was presented with a lapel badge, a Solidarity Warsaw University badge. So I appended it to my lapel. And then I actually forgot that it was there and went back to England and went to dine at high table. And somebody had brought a Russian scientist as their guest, who by accident was seated exactly opposite me. He did not speak much English but he could not take his eyes off my lapel. I cannot think what story he must have made up to explain it to himself because he could not ask me.

Antoni was great fun because he said and wrote exactly what he thought. You could do this in Poland in the Communist period, just as you could get a chair without being a party member, though you had to work harder than other people to do it. But back to Eric. As a *Festschrift* for Eric, Antoni Mączak wrote an essay called *From Feudalism to Capitalism and Back, the Polish Example*. When he sent it in, there was no problem. But before it was published, Jaruzelski came to power, so it was delayed, and for a time Antoni found it hard to travel outside

Poland. But then it all cleared up. I think he had friends in the Party who sorted things out for him.

At the History Department of the Warsaw University and at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences there were lots of interesting people, and especially early modernists, such as Andrzej Wyczański (1924–2008), Janusz Tazbir (1927–2016), Antoni Mączak (1928–2003). I was also in close contact with Maria Bogucka (1929–2020).

I have always felt very positive about Poland despite the fact that my grandmother had to leave in the 1880s, the age of great pogroms. She spoke Polish but forgot it after she came to Britain. She was learning French when she was seven and her textbook, which I still have, is French on one side and Polish written in Cyrillic on the other because of where it was published, in Łodż.

6)

Veronika Čapská: The difference between how relatively open Polish historiography was in the 1970s and 1980s in comparison, for example, to the situation in Czechoslovakia is stunning. Did you manage to forge and maintain contact with any Czechoslovak historians?

Peter Burke: That came much more slowly, although I first visited Prague in 1962. I was just a student then and managed to see the Stalin monument just before it was dynamited. So, it took time to get to know Czechoslovak historians. After 1968 I came to know best those who were here: Mikuláš Teich (1918–2018), a very patriotic Slovak, and of course, in my university which at that time was Sussex, Eduard Goldstücker (1913–2000) was given a chair of Comparative Literature. I got to know him quite well. I used to have lunch with him regularly. Six months after he came to England he not only still had his passport but also his Party card and he flew back to take part in committee meetings. I would meet him at lunch and he would say, 'you would never guess what Suslov said at the Party meeting yesterday'. Of course, this funny in-between time could not last. First he lost his Party card, then he lost his citizenship. But I think he went back after 1989.

I went back to Czechoslovakia in 1989, after a long gap, because we spent the incredible academic year 1989–1990 in Berlin at the *Wissenschaftskolleg*, arriving a few weeks before the fall of the Wall, so Prague was nearby, and it was interesting for us to stand on Wenceslas Square at the very moment that they announced that Havel was elected President. An amazing number of people were squashed into the square. Then we went back for a holiday and went to see

Tábor and České Budějovice. The architecture is better preserved than in Poland, I think.

Since then, I have made two memorable academic visits, one to lecture at the Charles University in 2005 and then a joint invitation to lecture in Brno and Olomouc in 2013. By coincidence, I was taken to visit battlefields on both occasions, first Bílá Hora and then Austerlitz (Slavkov)!

In my Cambridge time the Czech I knew best was Ernest Gellner (1925–1995). And I remember one paradox. He wrote *Nations and Nationalism*, the marvellously detached study of nationalism in the 1980s. But when the Czechs and Slovaks separated, Ernest was furious with the Slovaks. He kept talking about it as a marriage which had broken up and the guilty party was the Slovaks. Of course, he was Czech-speaking. His uncle, I believe, was a leading poet (VČ: František Gellner, 1881–1914). When he came to England as a teenager and then the war broke out, he volunteered to serve in the Czech brigades. He did not go into the British army. He still had a strong Czechoslovak identity. It seems extraordinary he was able to write his book *Nations and Nationalism* with a very detached idea of nationalism, although not quite as detached as Eric Hobsbawm who regarded nationalism as absurd and pathological and who clearly never felt allegiance to any nation. He thought he was European, I am sure.

Eric was an interesting man. I knew him for over fifty years. Very few people really knew Eric. But we were always friendly from the time I invited him to Oxford as an undergraduate to speak in a history society, one of these societies which flourish in Oxford and Cambridge where money from the colleges or the university gives them funds, so we could take the speaker out to dinner in one of the best restaurants in Oxford. This was in 1959. English restaurants were rather formal at that time and Eric was wearing a polo-neck sweater. And the waiter (who was wearing white tie and tails) gave him a very dirty look. I was afraid we were going to be chucked out of the restaurant, but the waiter decided he would not make a scene. Eric apparently did not notice what was going on. That was very amusing.

We saw one another irregularly but fairly frequently, right into his last years, indeed more so in the last years because we also became very friendly with Jack Goody (1919–2015) and Jack was a very old friend of Eric's from their student days. The last time I saw Eric was at the performance of a Mozart opera in London; we discussed the quality of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

7)

Veronika Čapská: In your recent book *Exiles and Expatriates in the History of Knowledge* you were able to utilize many of your colleagues' memories, and this

book also differs from your previous monographs in the degree to which you take a civic stance and you clearly express that you are anti-Brexit. I think that makes this book very special. Another interesting aspect of the book is that you have equipped it with a list of migrant women scholars, many of whom emigrated from Central Europe, which evokes a certain void. It raises the question of what these educated women in Central Europe might have created and written, had they not been forced to leave. So I would like to ask if it was your personal frustration that led you to take this step and become more open about your political views in this book?

Peter Burke: Yes, I thought that Britain had integrated quite nicely into Europe and then I woke up and discovered that quite a substantial group of British people just do not like having all these foreigners around. I knew that Britain used to be like that, but I thought people had got over it. So, yes, this was the first book which was not just written because I was interested in early modern European history but also because I was worried about something. It is the book I have been most emotionally involved with, together with the latest book which I have just finished writing, which is about specialization and about polymaths (it was published in 2020 under the title *The Polymath*). There, the frustration is that the University of Sussex, which I joined with great enthusiasm in 1962 because it had this interdisciplinary banner, gave up being interdisciplinary early in the 21st century, which I thought was very retrograde and so where *Exiles* responds to ethnocentrism in the literal sense, *The Polymath* responds to the ethnocentrism of disciplines in the metaphorical sense. I am annoyed by both.

8)
Veronika Čapská: One of the methods you utilized in *Exiles and Expatriates* is prosopography, a method which may seem rather dry or prone to a mechanical usage. Would you recommend prosopography primarily for particular research situations, such as an initial mapping of a newly emerging research field, or do you think it can be more universally useful? What do you see as the method's strengths and weaknesses?

Peter Burke: For me, this method was something I got used to doing: four different books of mine are based on prosopography, because I had got annoyed with historians who generalized without letting their readers know the basis of their generalisations. Even when you use simple words like 'less' or 'more', they are implicitly quantitative and I wanted to come out into the open. So first of all, the monograph *The Italian Renaissance* had six hundred people that I was focus-

ing on. And then the book on *Venice and Amsterdam* was similar in its focus on two elites. And the book *Exiles and Expatriates* was the third time I did it, and the book about polymaths is the fourth time.

It gives one a clear basis for generalising and at the same time one discovers all sorts of fascinating things about the individuals, which means that you can enliven the book with very vivid concrete examples. I think the ones in the forthcoming book you have not yet seen are even more eccentric and amusing, because polymaths are people who sometimes lead rather strange lives – but already the book on exiles often featured people who lived in several different countries and mixed languages up and so on.

9)

Veronika Čapská: In your book *Exiles and Expatriates* you interconnect the history of diasporas with the history of knowledge. Your understanding of knowledge in this monograph and in your earlier books is very broad. At the same time, it seems easier to trace the contributions of migrants to the learned culture rather than to the sphere of practical skills. Can you see any promising examples which deserve more research and might help to changes this notorious imbalance?

Peter Burke: I would love to be able to do this. And I would guess that the French Protestant diaspora in the late seventeenth century brought many workers in silk industry or silversmithing (in England, we still say 'Huguenot silver' when we mean certain kinds of eighteenth-century silver like the candle sticks in my college that we put out when people retire to what we call the 'parlour' after dinner to drink port). But all the same it is really very tricky to calculate what differences the immigrants made to the practices of weaving silk or working with silver. One can identify the names of famous craftsmen who did have this origin. Clockmaking as well. And there is even this interesting family that comes to my mind. I have always bought spectacles from Dollond & Aitchison. At some point I thought Dollond does not look like an English name and I must find out. The first individual with this name in England was a Huguenot silk weaver. And then the children diversified into other trades and one of them started to make optical instruments and was obviously unusually able and started to make experiments and invented different forms of spectacles and so on. The firm lasted until extremely recently. And now, I am afraid, it has been swallowed by Boots. That is the fate of the smaller firms in the globalizing world. But the interesting question is the one about who we really have to thank for modifications to certain techniques? And that is very rarely a matter of record. So it is difficult to

write the history of skills. I think it has to be done via what Marc Bloch called the 'regressive method'.

As you may know, anthropologists have done some interesting things in this area because several of them decided to conduct their fieldwork by being apprenticed to certain kinds of craftsmen. I think somebody went to a blacksmith in west Africa, and one of the professors at the University of London chose to become an apprentice minaret builder in Yemen. Just to watch how the people who had done this before would explain to the new people like him what to do. And of course, if this could be done over a long period, then you could make comparisons and document changes in a tradition. That would be very valuable. But that would mean that anthropologists would have had to have thought of this fifty or eighty years ago, and that was not what they were interested in those days, so we still have to wait.

In 2017 I was asked to give the *Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture* in London. Raphael Samuel (1934–1996), who was a great friend of mine, was always more interested in ordinary people than in intellectuals. Since his family, like my mother's family, came from East Central Europe, I thought a talk about exiles would be appropriate (the lecture *Two Diaporas: the Place of Exiles in the History of Knowledge* – VČ). But, of course, it made me think about how Raph would have done it and the difficulties in trying to do it in a way that he would have liked to do it. He did the oral history of the people that the middle class called 'quarry roughs', the ones who were working in Headington Quarry (Headington stone was used since the Middle Ages for buildings in Oxford, including many colleges – VČ). He could interview people for memories of the previous 30 years, but going back further is very tricky.

10)

Veronika Čapská: What examples of migrants' contribution to the history of knowledge first come to your mind in relation to intercultural experience, hybridization and cross-cultural understanding or misunderstanding?

Peter Burke: Perhaps the contribution of the exiles of the 1920s and 1930s, which is well documented and also still part of the 'communicative memory', to use Aleida and Jan Assmann's concept. These refugee scholars had their habitus, their mentality, one that you only become conscious of when you start to operate in another culture. And they ran up against the culture of Anglo-American empiricism and realized how much more important theory was to them. Specifically, in Oxford and Cambridge they taught a lot of students as late as when I was an undergraduate.

It was lectures by Edgar Wind (1900–1971) that originally inspired me to focus on the Renaissance. And I went to lectures by other people who came from either Central Europe or, in the case of Nicholas Zernov (1898–1980), Russia, I suppose. And of course we had Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), whose family had lived in Riga; they left after 1917 and he always spoke English with a thick Russian accent. Being taught by people like that or just going to their lectures made one realize they had a different 'style of thought' to use Karl Mannheim's famous phrase. I think this is a very interesting cultural encounter which may also be a collision or clash which was very fruitful and some kind of hybridization was the result. But it is not easy to be very detailed about this. You could collect examples of each side complaining about the other at the moment of contact. G. M. Young (1882–1959), a rather distinguished historian of nineteenth century Britain, complained about Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) and conversely Karl Mannheim complained about the difficulty of teaching sociology in England. All this is mainly at the implicit level, though sometimes in the course of the collision, the implicit becomes explicit.

I think it was Michael Polanyi (1891–1976) who coined these famous phrases like 'implicit' or 'tacit knowledge' and he must have experienced this himself a bit. He also experienced the extraordinary flexibility of the academic system the day he went to see the Vice-Chancellor in Manchester and said 'I do not want to teach theoretical chemistry any longer, I think I am really a philosopher' and the Vice-Chancellor just said 'ok, just move across the campus'. Because he did not want to lose anybody as good as that.

But still Polanyi, like Mannheim, did have this problem of not being understood by the British. Even though the most violent assault on Mannheim when he was in London came from two fellow immigrants, from inside the LSE. There was a great battle with Morris Ginsberg (1889–1970), which might just have been about territory. I think Morris Ginsberg did not want another fellow-immigrant around. Then the more intellectual one was the fight with Karl Popper (1902–1994). Although Popper talks about Plato and Marx and does not mention Mannheim, The *Open Society and its Enemies* can be read as an attack on Mannheim in particular. Interestingly, Ernst Gombrich, who was a friend of Popper's, took up his ideas about methodological individualism.

Three years ago, I was invited to give a talk about Gombrich and cultural history. And of course the problem was that he attacked it. From outside it might look as if he was doing it, but Gombrich's view was that he was not doing cultural history. He was not even doing art history, because he begins *The Story of Art* with that wonderfully individualist statement 'There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists.' Which of course is a direct critique of the Hungarian

Marxists that he knew in exile, notably Arnold Hauser (1892–1978), who was a rather crude Marxist, and Frederick Antal (1887–1954), who was much more subtle. But for Gombrich they were all to be cast out. In a sense my invitation was like holding a hot potato because this was the celebration of Gombrich's centenary in the Warburg Institute, but the invitation to the conference came with the statement: 'Don't feel that you have to pay homage.'

So I presented Gombrich as a methodological individualist who might seem to be more English than the English, and compared him to Mrs Thatcher saying 'there is no such a thing as society'. There is this interesting link, because Margaret Thatcher's guru was Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1992) who was also Popper's guru, and it turns out that there is an Austrian tradition of methodological individualism that goes back at least as far as Carl Menger (1840–1921).

So, in a sense, Ernst was always a patriotic Austrian. In interviews later in life, he would say he was Viennese living in Britain rather than British, even though he was well assimilated by this time. I interviewed him myself once, but that was much earlier. If I had had the chance to interview him later, I would have asked him what he thought of the Austrian tradition of methodological individualism.

There is also a bit of the aspect of wanting to be more English than the English, which is what happened to Geoffrey Elton (1921–1994) as well, although like Ernst Gombrich and Mikuláš Teich he never spoke English without a thick accent. When I called it a German accent, Mikuláš said 'Czech German'. And it is true that the young Elton grew up in Prague because his father, Victor Ehrenberg (1891–1976), held a position teaching ancient history at the German Charles University. I have to admit that I admire Victor Ehrenberg's work more than Geoffrey Elton's. And it is interesting that Geoffrey Elton claimed that he only changed his name because he served in the British army in the Second World War. Although there were other people in this situation who served in the British army without changing their names. Again, Geoffrey (formerly Gerhard) wanted to be a historian and his father was a historian and he wanted to somehow show his independence. But he also strongly identified with English culture and it shaped his work.

Similarly, Richard Gombrich (*1937), who was in my year at Oxford, had the problem that he wanted to study the humanities but wanted also to escape from the shadow of Ernst Gombrich and luckily he discovered Sanskrit. He identified a field that Ernst was not familiar with. He was respected by his father for it and has followed a rather important career in Sanskrit studies. I was so pleased he heard my lecture about Ernst Gombrich and cultural history and afterwards he said he completely agreed with me that Ernst was very good on individuals

and very good on what was universally human but was extremely uncomfortable with anything in between.

11)

Veronika Čapská: Your approach to migrants in your book *Exiles and Expatriates* appears very kind (as I dubbed it for myself) and it is clear you regard them as enrichment to their host societies. I would like to draw attention to the social space left behind by migrants and specifically to the question of how we can analyse the loss, the void, the brain drain and the situation of countries that fail to attract people.

Peter Burke: The deprovincialization of the cultures where the exiles and expatriates go is complemented by the provincialization of those they leave behind, for example of German culture after the war and still more of Austrian culture. Of course Austria received a double blow. The cosmopolitan culture ended when the empire ended in 1919 and then came the brain drain with Hitler's takeover in 1939, indeed already before that because people saw it coming and decided to leave.

Germany has recovered now. I am not sure about Austria, honestly. I mean, I do like going to Vienna. I have given lectures there and in other Austrian towns, such as Graz and Klagenfurt. I think some of the younger people are doing interesting things but the atmosphere, with few exceptions, is still rather parochial. One of the major exceptions is the *Institut für Kulturwissenschaften und Theatergeschichte* in Vienna. They have embraced the idea that by the history of theatre they would mean any kind of drama, including everyday life, and whenever I have been at conferences there, the really interesting papers have been about the theatre outside the theatre.

Veronika Čapská: Do other usable concepts come to your mind in addition to the dual category of (de)provincialization? Moreover, as you have mentioned Austria, we might discuss the possible parallels with Latin America: it has been increasingly suggested that European semi-peripheries (such as East-Central and Eastern Europe) share certain features with Latin American countries, such as their rather Sisyphean efforts to catch up academically with the core Western countries.

Peter Burke: Another useful idea, to my mind, is that of awareness of alternatives, especially alternative styles of thought, such as the more theoretical and

the more empirical. In the cultural encounters of the 1930s, both sides, Anglo-American and Central European, became much more aware of the other.

I do see a parallel between East-Central European countries and Latin American ones: both groups see themselves as on the periphery (actually, so many places see themselves as on the periphery, as I have learned in The Netherlands, Australia and elsewhere!). They are caught between wanting to imitate the 'centre' (wherever that now is) and wanting to be themselves, like the Russian intellectuals in the age of Westernizers versus Slavophiles. It was actually a Brazilian writer, Oswald de Andrade, who offered a solution to that problem in the form of a joke, saying that Brazilians should not imitate the French or the English but 'cannibalize' them, making foreign ideas their own by a process of 'digestion' or domestication.

12)

Veronika Čapská: One of the problems of which I have been very much aware is the inaccessibility of scholarly literature. This continues to be a major barrier, and can be seen as one source of provincialism. If a significant proportion of scholars cannot access the latest scholarly texts, it is very difficult for them to connect.

Peter Burke: Provincialism survives in one half of Europe for financial reasons but in Britain for linguistic reasons. So we have got all these books in the Cambridge University Library but it sometimes happens that I am the first person to take them out, after a twenty-year lag. There are some distinguished exceptions but if you look at the majority of historians, they do not read many foreign languages, sometimes none at all. And that is worrying because the situation is now much worse than it was when I came to Cambridge in 1979. Throughout the 1980s when I met students for the first time I would ask them which modern languages they read. And they would usually say two: French and one other (most often German, Spanish or Italian). Then in the 1990s I spotted a new reluctance to answer. I did not want to embarrass them and drew the conclusion that they could not read an article in French any more. And that is how I believe it still is. Of course, if they really need a language they can learn it. As I always say to my new PhD students: 'This is the best time in your life to learn more languages because you have got three years just to concentrate on research'. One year, I noticed that two students did not even smile at that. Afterwards, when they came to see me individually, I discovered one was from Latvia and the other was from Estonia, and they had eight languages each already. Of course, it is wonderful to be working with students like that.

13)

Veronika Čapská: One of your major areas of interest has been the field of translation history, and you sometimes mention that your father was a translator, too. In the Czech Republic, historians often suspect some Czech books to have been translations or adaptations from other languages, typically from German. It seems the situation in other small language countries might have been fairly similar. The research is complicated by multiple editions of source texts which have not always survived. Thus, it seems there is still a very long way to go before we will (re)construct the intertextual early modern Europe. Are there any major surprises you suspect might yet wait for us in this area?

Peter Burke: I am not sure about surprises but I think that the study of the translation of texts is a marvellous litmus paper for studying cultural encounters and for exploring the principle of creative adaptation or cultural translation which you want to see working out concretely. So you take a text and you look at the translation of the text and search for all the discrepancies and differences between the two. And you try to work out what was the logic of not doing what one might have thought was the obvious thing. And I think that is extraordinarily interesting.

At first I was interested in translation for its own sake; in the 1960s I actually did translate a text from seventeenth century Italian. Then later, once I was into cultural exchange and hybridity, I went back to translation. I have to say that it is just like working on the social history of language. The reception of this kind of work is much stronger in translation studies that it is in history. And it is much stronger in some parts of Europe than others. When I was working on the social history of language, I was never asked to give a lecture on the subject in England, but I was asked to in Wales, in Finland and in the Netherlands: small countries where people – almost of necessity – speak several languages rather well. They were interested in this project in a way that English historians were not. You do not have many historians here who think of translation as an important topic of historical study in itself.

I do meet people interested in the field now, as it is becoming less and less relevant what department you work at, as it is vital to exchange ideas. And when you retire you can ignore divisions into historical periods and disciplines. You can just do what you want. In a sense, retiring set me free. I still like to talk to students a lot, but retirement felt like a liberation from the constraints of professional specialization.

14)

Veronika Čapská: Another recent development has been the turn to materiality, to the agency of objects and to non-humans (animals and plants) as actors. This shift is related to a growing interest in environmental history and to calls for a humbler (less anthropocentric) approach, which could take a critical view of the long-privileged position of human actors. What is your view of these developments? In his book *The Historian's Craft,* Marc Bloch wrote in the early 1940s that historians follow 'the scent of human flesh'. Is this changing in the 21st century?

Peter Burke: Yes, once again as the present changes, we look at the past from different angles. We are living in an age of increasing awareness of the environment. Sooner or later, governments are going to take notice, although they will probably do too little too late. The increasing environmental consciousness is bound to influence what topics historians choose to do research on. And similarly, if you are aware of the debate on animal rights, then you will look at animals in history rather differently.

So there are these exciting new developments, including the history of things, but I do think there is a danger of confusion when one talks about the agency of things. Some people talk about it in such a way that it sounds like the revival of animism. Other people think of it more as a useful metaphor. I think you can feel a thing exerting pressure on you, like a pen which only works if you have the right hand position, so there is a sense in which you feel the pen is telling you 'if you want to write with me you have to adapt yourself to me' and not the other way round. But I would rather think of this as a vivid metaphor. Things give you cues, including buildings. For example, Cambridge colleges were built for people in a different century with a different way of life but the staircases and the halls and so on are still giving people living now cues as to how to behave, which I am sure you will have noticed much more than I do because of coming from a different environment.

The first year I was here I was struck by so many things. Of course I had been a student at Oxford, but in 1979 I moved to teach in Cambridge from the University of Sussex, and it was a culture shock. In order to cope with that culture shock I started to take notes, which I thought of as field notes. And then after a year or two I went to a conference on art history in Italy and Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was there. He was still working on *Homo academicus*, so as soon as he heard I was from Cambridge he had many questions about the system. At some point I confessed to him that I had actually made anthropological field notes on my college. So, he said, choose any name you like and I will publish

them in *Actes de la Recherche*. I took him at his word, and chose pseudonyms for myself and for the college. But I chose pseudonyms that would be decipherable by people who know Cambridge well. So I called the college St. Dominic's because Emmanuel College was built where the Dominican Friars used to be. And I became William Dell because he was a fellow of Emmanuel in the seventeenth century who shocked the establishment by giving a sermon in front of the Vice-Chancellor in which he spoke against wearing 'gowns, hoods, tippets and such like forms and follies' and against using Latin in the University.[1] He was a hero to my hero, Christopher Hill, who wrote an article about William Dell because he found his radical ideas sympathetic. And when I was a student at Oxford, Christopher Hill, Lawrence Stone and A. J. P. Taylor were the people whose lectures I wanted to hear most. Thus, 'William Dell' was meant as an invitation for readers to work out what the article was really about.

15)

Veronika Čapská: You have mentioned that the Cambridge architecture and university architecture more broadly suggest parallels with monastic architecture and monastic life. I have myself noticed the sign that reads 'silence please' in front of the Trinity Hall's Jerwood Library. Can you address these parallels in more detail?

Peter Burke: Yes, occasionally I absent-mindedly call the college hall the refectory. There is an annual conference on economic history in Prato; I recall that I was there one year and there was a conference dinner held at a former convent, in the old refectory. Some people were sitting on the bench against the wall and then there were movable benches or chairs on the other side. I saw there was a space on the side against the wall. I remembered what we used to do in the hall in Oxford: to get in, you just went and stood on the table. People did not have to get up for you. So I just did that without thinking and only afterwards realized that maybe that is not what they do in Italy. But these physical habits are what comes with living in a particular environment. It leaves its mark on you. Just as it is automatic that if you see people sitting on a bench, you must take your place next to them and not with a space between you because that would be bad manners. And then you notice someone who does not do it and think it must be a foreigner or at least a foreigner to Oxford and Cambridge.

1 Cf. WILLIAM DELL, *St. Dominic's: an Ethnographic Note on a Cambridge College*, Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales 70/1987, pp. 74–78.

16)

Veronika Čapská: Would you allow me and our readers to take a virtual peek into your study room and hear about your current projects? And what is more, as scholars have many dreams but notoriously struggle with a lack of time: are there any dream topics you hope to pursue in the near future?

Peter Burke: I have just finished my project on polymaths and my latest book *The Polymath. A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag* is now in the press (it was published by Yale University Press in 2020. – VČ). So I am now thinking about the next book, which will be the third time I have written a book jointly with my wife Maria Lúcia, and it will be about travel and knowledge.

I have got hooked on knowledge, you see. *Polymaths* will be my sixth book on the history of knowledge and *Travel* will be the seventh. It will be about two different topics: knowledge in order to travel and travel for the sake of knowledge. I want to write a chapter on the history of guide books – from the guides for pilgrims to Jerusalem or Rome (the *Mirabilia Roma*) in the twelfth century down to the *Rough Guides* of today. But then there is also travel for knowledge. Travel for knowledge entailed for example scientific expeditions, anthropologists' fieldwork and so on. So the book will have these two halves: Knowledge for Travel and Travel for Knowledge. And I think I will just write essays on things that I am particularly interested in.

We have the idea of writing on travelling in order to understand better what you already have at home. For example, the English writer G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) wrote about his next door neighbour who saw him packing his suitcase and to the question 'Where are you going?' he answered 'To France.' And when the neighbour added 'Why are you going?', he heard 'To understand Battersea better,' because he lived in Battersea. So we should see travel as a circular tour. The same can be shown with the example of Gilberto Freyre, a man about whom we have already written a joint book, who spent the crucial years of his life partly in the United States and partly travelling in Europe, spending some months in Oxford, which he said was the best time in his life. When he went back, he saw the northeast of Brazil quite differently thanks to his experiences abroad. He was described by another anthropologist, Darcy Ribeiro (1922–1997), as the combination of an insider and an outsider. If you can achieve that simultaneously, it gives you a kind of a richness of vision which you can see also very clearly in the book *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (in the English translation, *The Masters and the Slaves*) and the other social-cultural histories of Brazil that Freyre wrote.

I was very pleased when the Brazilian anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (*1943) read my little book on Montaigne and said that what she liked was that I combined the twentieth century vision of Montaigne with an attempt to reconstruct how he would have been seen by a sixteenth century reader. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha works on indigenous groups in Brazil and she taught anthropology for about twenty years at the University of Chicago at the time when, under Marshall Sahlins (*1930), it was the leading anthropology department. She was interested in controversies among different indigenous peoples about who owns particular knowledges and even within indigenous groups conflicts about what constitutes the chief's knowledge, men's knowledge, women's knowledge, everybody's knowledge, etc. It is not only anthropologists who ask these questions; these are questions that the people they study also ask themselves.

The whole division between anthropologists and the people the anthropologists study is becoming more and more tenuous. I love the book *Contesting Culture* by Gerd Baumann (1953–2014), the German anthropologist who did fieldwork in southwest London, near Heathrow airport, where there were several groups of immigrants: Irish, Indian, Pakistani, Afro-Caribbean, and so on. What struck him was the way they kept using the word culture. When he asked them: 'Why do you do this?', the answer was often: 'It is part of our culture.' The word 'culture' used to belong to anthropologists but now it is the informants who use the word all the time. And I think that symbolizes this very interesting collapse of the intellectual frontier.

17)

Veronika Čapská: Let me turn to the balance between archival work and theoretical work and to new developments in historical research. I have mentioned the rise of transcultural history or global microhistory and, as someone coming from the region which is rather inward-looking, East-Central Europe, I often feel that historical sources, especially the pre-modern ones are strongly embedded in local contexts. It can be quite challenging to find evidence of global connections. Do you have any advice for scholars who are passionate about working with archival sources but come up against certain limits in semi-peripheral or peripheral regions. Obviously, there is a difference between doing research on Atlantic history in France and French archives, say, compared with archives in landlocked countries.

Peter Burke: First of all, I think that still only a minority of historians are reflective on the histories of archives themselves. Anybody who works in an archive

should be thinking about the history of that archive. Archives have been founded for particular reasons, they have been organised and reorganised for particular reasons. If you are not aware of this, then you may put the document in your hands into the wrong context or maybe there is no wrong context but you do not put it in enough different contexts, which affects the way you interpret it.

Nineteenth-century archivists had this passion to put everything in new categories but nowadays, archivists are quite concerned with trying to reconstitute older categories as well. Often, you need several different catalogues of the archive to consult, although you can only put the document in one physical place. Some historically-minded archivists as well as some historians have been thinking about this and working on it. One particularly interesting archivist in the Netherland who is now retired, Eric Ketelaar (*1944), has been a pioneer of this. He was one of the archivists most concerned with trying to adopt new methods and more advanced ways of expert consulting in the day to day archival work.

Doing archival work on a modern subject, when I researched Gilberto Freyre, was quite a special experience. His house had been turned into an institute, so his letters were there and his books were all around on the shelves in the order that he had left them and with his inscriptions in the margins. I think I have not worked in any early modern archives since the late 1980s. When you get older you do not necessarily want to spend all those weeks in a cheap hotel while you are looking at everything. You are also attracted to big subjects for which you cannot possibly use archives because it would take several hundred years to work through them. Everything comes at a price.

Working a lot in archives means that you have to limit yourself to the projects the archives are useful for and you do not get the greater overview. But if you go for the greater overview, you lose touch with the sources themselves because you spend your time reading other people's books and putting things together, rather than going directly to the documents. We need all those different activities: ideally any historian should try all these different things in their lifetime.

It is rather difficult to keep several balls in the air at the same time, like these serial polymaths who started one subject and then they moved to a totally different discipline: that is what led to their distinctive contribution to knowledge. In this latest book on polymaths, as in the one about exiles, I am interested especially in distinctive contributions to knowledge, not just the ones that happen anyway. The serial polymaths' distinctive contribution is that they come to their second discipline with the habitus of the first, which means they do not ask the questions that are conventionally answered in the second discipline but they ask the ones they were more used to in the first. At Sussex I got to know a professor of biology quite well. His name was John Maynard Smith (1920–2004) and he

was a leading figure in biology. At one point he remarked that if he managed to do something original it might be because he had not read biology in Cambridge, he had read engineering instead. After engineering he became interested in biology and wrote his PhD on the evolution of the flight of birds, but looking at it from the point of view of an aeronautical engineer. When you look, you find that other people had often made that sort of shift. It can serve as an advantage when scholars do not make assumptions formed by a specific culture or discipline. Expatriates and polymaths tend to be free of narrow presuppositions.

Veronika Čapská: Thank you, Peter, for sharing your personal insights and scholarly expertise on the benefits of crossing geographical, cultural and disciplinary boundaries, and much more.