



Interview with Prof. Jiří Štaif

December 2022

Dear Professor, how do you perceive the current state of the field of economic and social history?

I believe that the field of economic and social history, if I may speak primarily for modern social history, is recovering from the rather crushing blows of postmodernism, poststructuralism, the linguistic turn, and the cultural turn. I even believe that it is experiencing something of a renaissance. In this respect I have been influenced by some British historians (Geoff Eley, Patrick Joyce, Kevin Passmore) who are taking the search for new paths in the field of social history very seriously indeed.

What do you see as the importance of the authors mentioned?

I will at least stop at Patrick Joyce, who has written a stimulating work called *State of Freedom* (2013), which is a social history of the modern British state since 1800. His account seems to me to be a good topic for critical reflection on his Foucaultian concept of modern governmentality and his use of the British postal system as a metaphor of modern social integration. However, in my opinion, it does not take much account of historiographical developments that were influenced by the spatial turn (for the 19th century, see especially Jürgen Osterhammel). The older trace that influenced me would probably be Pierre Bourdieu and his conception of power, especially in its symbolic forms. In a linguistic turn, respect for language, through which social relations are “metaphorically” expressed, is important for contemporary social history. At the same time, I believe that the methodological legacy of Max Weber, who was concerned with the legitimacy of social relations and the legitimacy of power, is still relevant, which I think is an essential issue on which social history in the current Social History Seminar at the IESH at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University is built. Moreover, I think that the nominalist interpretation of Karl Marx, which I first came across in my historiographical interests with Werner Sombart, is still not “dead”.

How do you assess the future possibilities of the field and the Institute of Economic and Social History at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University?

Perhaps it is easier to assess the future possibilities of the field. I believe that the field of modern social history will gain a new perspective by being more conceptual, that

is, by approaching interpersonal relations in modern society from systematically reflected theoretical and methodological perspectives. Furthermore, I am convinced that it must be analytical-critical. The current state of society, which is apparently already post-post-modern (and there might actually be more of these “post-”s), needs not “only” cultural-anthropological approaches. These are not sufficient, in my view, for the critical reflection that can open up another fruitful discussion on the perspectives of the field.

If you mention culture and the ambivalences that its study has in social historical research, how do you think the cultural turn changed the interpretation of key modernizing trends in the 19th century? What of modernization theories and historical interpretations do you see as alive, and where do you think our view of 19th century European history needs to change?

First of all, I would like to note that in recent years there has been a certain “inflation” of various methodological turns. This was not only a cultural and linguistic turn, but also a material, spatial and transnational turn, to mention at least those that affected the conceptualization of historical research. This opens up the question of the “lifespan” of innovations so conceived as initial impulses for historians’ concrete research. Undoubtedly, they can find something of their own in each of these and possibly other turns. Equally important, however, is why the boom has occurred in recent decades, whether it can be explained by the abruptness, opacity, and unexpectedness of changes in contemporary society that place considerable demands on their categorization, or whether it is a matter of increasing interdisciplinary and generational competition in the social sciences, or an effort to demonstrate conceptual agility at a time when intellectuals, scholars, and scientists are increasingly being robbed of their social influence by the Internet.

But not to get too far away from the question posed. In my view, the cultural turn has contributed to the fact that the key modernizing trends of the 19th century have ceased to be understood by us as historians of social history as a one-way path of historical progress moving along an upward line, but much more in line with the authentic attitudes of historical actors, their value assumptions and preferences, which bear traces of cultural embeddedness. Social history is now much more profiled by its multidimensional character than by its one-dimensional determination (see, for example, the interpretation of relations between people on the basis of their class affiliation alone). Social structures have been transformed into looser compositions in networks of relations between people that can be interpreted through signs that name the various differences and inequalities between them. The situations in which people find themselves are of considerable importance for the choice of these names. We are now also much more concerned with the extent to which the power established in society is understood as legitimate by its “clients”, or rather, we are interested in what confirms it as legitimate and what is capable of weakening it or even rejecting it as unacceptable. Concepts such as the multiple implications of human agency and the representation of historical actors not only in social, political and economic terms but also in terms of gender, ethnicity, race and generation have begun to enter into interpretive work much more





than before. Today, rather than discussing the original modernization theories that emerged after World War II in the United States, which worked from a bipolar model: traditional (outdated) vs. modern (progressive), I would like to discuss the various conceptions of modernity that focus on analyzing the intensity and reasons for social change, its consequences, its directions, and the space it opens for the further direction of society.

Can this also be applied to the history of national movements or, as it is sometimes put, to the history of nationalism?

I think so. The well-known British historian Richard J. Evans published in 2016 a book *The Pursuit of Power. Europe 1815–1914*, which for me is an example of one of the exemplary syntheses of the 19th century that overcame the limitations of national histories and can therefore be considered in some sense transnational, without trying to squeeze the “little ones” out of history in favor of the “big ones”. It takes the “taming” of elemental nature, the homogenization of time, the successful control of large-scale diseases and epidemics of civilization, the decline in mortality, the control of elemental sexuality, effective medicine, efforts to cure mental illness, the elimination of cruel punishments, and the reduction of the number of capital punishment sentences as the main civilizational manifestations of European modernity at the time. The categories of nationalism and national movements do not play a constitutive role in his interpretation, but rather he is much more concerned with the legacy of the European revolutions, especially the 1848–1849 revolution, for the development of European modernity, the paradoxes of freedom that modernity brings, and the social revolution, which he sees as one of the catalysts of social change. He is equally concerned with the role that emotions and democratic challenges played in them. His interpretation also points out that parallel to these modernizing changes, the building and expansion of great power states with imperial ambitions is taking place at this very time. In doing so, they are playing out a series of conflicts that are heading towards unprecedented transnational warfare.

How have these changes affected the concept of elites, another significant category of historical research on the Czech national movement, to which you have made a decisive contribution?

In my book *Obezřetná elita* (The Circumspective Elite) on Czech society between tradition and revolution (2005), I attempted to “reconcile” social and cultural history with the concept of social modernization, or modernity. My line of interpretation was as follows: the protagonists of the Czech national movement were an elite that was alternative to the existing one. At the same time, it was cautious because it was socially dependent on the state, the nobility or the Catholic Church as its employers. As a mentally cautious alternative elite, it created a national alternative culture through which it gained its clientele. In this way, the social, cultural, and national phenomenon of the Czech national movement emerged. The revolution of 1848–1849 confronted it with the problem of political emancipation as well as with vexing geopolitical questions, while at the same time indicating the “dimensions” of the space of its self-realization in principle until 1914.

In my book *Modernizace na pokračování* (Modernization Continued), which deals with society in the Czech lands between 1770 and 1918 (2020), I set the previous explanatory concept in a broader social context. If I had previously understood the Czech circumspensive elite as players who played their game of social influence on a parallel playing field that they had defined for themselves and according to the rules that suited them, then in this case I started from the view that social modernization, or modernity, in the chosen time period took place on multiple playing fields with multiple players and that it involved a range of interests that cannot be reduced to the interests of the representatives of the Czech national movement. At the same time, the modernization processes were based on civil, political, economic, national, cultural and gender emancipation, which had a major influence on the fact that modernization in the sense of a multidimensional effort for social change continued. Its progress was complicated in particular by the fact that these types of emancipations also had their opponents, who also entered the game of social influence. Thus, the foundations of a social composition were formed in which a whole range of interactions took place, which need to be analyzed historically in order to arrive at the “vectors” that have fundamentally contributed to the direction in which historical events have taken. For example, social emancipation could be hindered by national emancipation, which in turn could hinder civil and political emancipation and vice versa. In this and other contexts, the Austrian state and its ability to mediate compromises between those social interests that tended to escalate played an important role. However, the effectiveness of its efforts was already declining in the last decades before the First World War. As it began to collapse during that period, opportunities for other solutions opened up.

In your opinion, does it still make sense to think about European revolutions today?

I’m not sure I have a clear answer to that question. First of all, I believe that the contemporary historian must pay as much attention to counterrevolutions as to modern revolutions. In both cases, he or she should focus primarily on how they legitimate their goals, who the “clients” of these legitimations are, and what causes the shift in focus from revolution to counterrevolution, if there is one. Equally important is the extent to which revolutions and counterrevolutions are able to solve accumulated social problems and what means they use to do so, or to what extent they solve existing problems and create new ones. In both cases, in my judgment, the question of the legitimacy of social change is thus raised. In this context, we cannot, of course, avoid the problem of the acceptability or unacceptability of using violence with which efforts at radical social upheaval or its suppression are inextricably linked. In my views I am undoubtedly strongly influenced by my research on the revolutionary years 1848–1849, to which I have devoted myself for years. I well understand that both revolution and counter-revolution have their deeper social causes and that they are capable of spectacularly influencing the direction of historical movement. However, a more objective assessment of their historical significance is only possible after a greater distance of time. Whether they were victorious revolutions, defeated revolutions, or revolutions that, so to speak, destroyed themselves, as in the Paris





Thermidor of 1794, undoubtedly plays a role. The apparent insecurity of the existing ruling elites, who are indecisive in the face of eruptive problems or even begin to doubt whether they have the “right” to lead society, also has a significant impact on the immediate “outbreak” of revolutions. Indeed, it is this legitimizing crisis of the power establishment that was manifested in several European states where the 1848 revolution took place.

Coming back to the faculty life, have you managed to raise someone among the masters and doctoral students whom you consider to be your student or your successor?

This is more a question for those students who have gone through my seminar, and there are undoubtedly dozens of them. I would hate to go in the direction that the question was asked because the notion of a student puts too much obligation or constraint on the student. I am of the opinion that nowadays young people who want to pursue history, even the history of modern social history, should have the choice of considering themselves as someone’s pupil, because the influences that are directed towards them are not only in the pedagogical process. There is an almost infinite number of them, not only because of the electronic culture, but also because our students are lucky enough to live in an open world which my generation had to catch up with.

Do you think that during its existence, the Institute has succeeded in educating some important personalities in the field?

I believe that in the time that the institute has been in existence, those students who are pursuing a career in the field have had some results behind them. The generation of the late 1990s is already moving into the position of the middle generation. Its influence on contemporary historiography is already clearly evident, and perhaps there is at least in some cases some of what we have tried to cultivate here as a horizon for research in the field of modern social history. I don’t like to name anybody because once you name somebody, somebody may feel left out or offended, which I wouldn’t like to do.

How do you perceive teaching history and the transformations in teaching economic and social history during your teaching career?

In the field of history at the Charles University Faculty of Arts, there was a separation of bachelor’s and master’s studies, which was not the case in 1993. There will probably be constant discussions about whether this was good or bad. For talented students, the bachelor’s degree is an enormous incentive, because they write really high-quality qualifying papers. In some cases, and I have had such students and I am proud of it, they wrote bachelor’s theses that were not only at the level of a master’s thesis, but with some modifications could be submitted as a rigorous thesis (so called “small doctorate”, PhDr.), and some of them were also able to gain the title PhD. On the other hand, there are students who try to “crawl through the system” so to speak and write only the most necessary, so the quality of these outputs is “mediocre”. There is a lot of variance, but I don’t know myself whether this is good or bad. I have learned to just “somehow” live in it.



How do you perceive the general transformation of higher education?

I'll probably answer somewhat conservatively here. I believe that higher education has opened up too much to a more or less uncontrolled influx of students and that this is related to the question of its funding, which is determined by the principle of paying per "head" per student. A university-oriented college should, and I hope this will not be perceived as arrogance on my part, have a certain exclusivity after all. I don't believe that 80% of the population should have a high school diploma "at any cost" and that 60% should have a college degree, even if it's just any college.

How do you assess the position of the IESH in the context of Czech historiography?

I think it is important that since the end of the 1990s, young people have asserted themselves in the Institute, who have really started to consider social history as the *raison d'être* of their existence, which has undoubtedly been reflected in their results and perhaps also in the interest of those students who have understood that social history is taken seriously here and, above all, that there is an effort, a willingness, but I would underline also an ability to invest in it conceptually, theoretically and methodologically. In this respect, there has been a real shift from the situation in 1993 when I joined the Institute. I believe that the Social History Seminar is something very different today than it was then.

Moving on to a more general level, how do you perceive the role of the intellectual and specifically the historian of modern social history in contemporary society?

I think that the historian of social history must see that he or she lives in the internet age, in which there is an overabundance of information and where the key to selecting it is not in many cases its truthfulness or verifiability. What is important is that they somehow engage, influence or entertain their consumer, or take them "somewhere else". I think that the ideal of the enlightened intellectual who educates the uneducated or explains the pitfalls of the Internet to the "less educated" is not, to put it popularly, "the real thing". The historian of social history should be tireless in critically analyzing society and not letting some party (politics, ideology, internet or other campaigns) impose on him the way of what to do or how to do it. However, he must, as I have already said, react critically to them, even if not immediately. This is also where I see the role of the intellectual today.

So how should an intellectual generally enter into discussions in society?

Above all, he must be internally convinced of the correctness of his opinion and must not be tempted to think that he will otherwise score points. These are points of public popularity, or the reflection that he may gain something prospectively or currently. I probably won't come up with anything new, but I think the basis of "intellectualism" is critical analysis. A critical analysis that positions itself neither as winners nor as losers in various social clashes and confrontations. This is not to say that I have always lived up to this "maxim"; however, the older I get, the more I am aware of this "commitment". Such a very simple reading of the past is that you interpret the winners



primarily by the “transgressions” of the losers and the losers primarily by the perspective of the winners, but that is a terrible, I would even say foolish, simplification.

During your time at the Institute, did you want to research or write something but didn’t find enough time to do it, or did you not do it for other reasons?

That’s a tough question, I really don’t know. I’m not the kind of historian who has a big dream of what he “must” write to “save” the world. I’m more the kind of historian who has certain ideas about his “own” field, has certain ideas about where it should be heading, and also welcomes “outside” suggestions, as long as they don’t come across as some kind of “dictum”.

This openness can also be read in your latest book *Modernizace na pokračování* (Modernization Continues), why do you think modernization is “continuing”?

The title is intended to be a metaphor for the fact that it is a series that transforms in its course, like a play, through individual “acts”. In doing so, the sets and actors change. The plots also shift, as if it were several stories in one “drama”, which, however, does not necessarily lead to a catharsis; in fact, it is characterized by a certain openness to plot alternatives that neither the author(s) nor the directors originally had in mind. Basically, my point is that social modernization cannot be seen only as a social good, but that it has certain peripatetic and ambivalent consequences that retroactively affect interpersonal relations.