INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR WILLIAM O'REILLY
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On the occasion of the invited visit of Dr William O'Reilly (University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall) to Prague and his lecture entitled *Selling Souls* organized jointly by the Charles University in Prague and Centre français de recherche en sciences sociales, an interview with Dr O'Reilly took place in Café U Rotlevů in Prague on November 7th 2017. The interview focuses on and honours his long-term research. With this the journal *History – Theory – Criticism/Dějiny – teorie – kritika* aims raise awareness of his work in which early modern Central and Eastern Europe occupies an important place.

1) William, could you, please, explain what has directed your research interests to Central Europe? What was the role of Robert J.W. Evans and other scholars in your scholarly formation? Have some impulses come from other disciplines than history itself?

As an undergraduate, first in Ireland and then later as an Erasmus student in Hamburg, I had opportunities to work with both medievalists and early modernists who were very interested in Central Europe. At University College Galway, Ireland (a College of the National University of Ireland) I came to especially appreciate the courses offered by Nicholas Canny (*1944), who was an early modern historian of Ireland, Britain and early America. On my Erasmus year at the University of Hamburg, I began to work with Horst Pietschmann (*1940), a great early modern Latin Americanist and Hispanist, who was friends with Nicholas Canny. By the time I finished my BA degree, which was in History and German, I have developed a rather eclectic interest in the history of language, in cultural but also political history and the comparative history of early modern period. I found myself, even at that early stage, trying to think about western Europe connecting with the wider world, but also critically about Central Europe connecting with it, too.

That led me (really with the encouragement and support of Nicholas Canny) to apply for two scholarships to do my Master's and PhD degrees. I was successful in securing a Fulbright scholarship to study at the University of Pennsylvania, where Canny's own PhD supervisor, Richard Dunn (*1928) was my mentor. My graduate plan at that time was to stay there as long as possible working on the history of German and in particularly Central European migration to North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the first year, however, I learnt that I had received the Ussher Scholarship to go to Exeter College, Oxford. I remember being interviewed by Robert Evans (*1943) and he agreed to supervise me. I ended up moving to Oxford, and working for my Master's degree and my doctoral degree (DPhil) at Oxford, supervised by Robert Evans, and for my Early American history by the Americanist Peter Thompson.

It was as a result of these fortuitous events that I had the opportunity to work both on Central Europe and on Central Europe's connections with early America, and for me that was really important. It was a challenge, certainly, but it was very important for me to keep these two areas of research and interest developing in parallel. I have to say that, particularly as a result of working with Robert Evans, I was pushed to think about Central Europe as being not on the margins of Eastern Europe or Western Europe but of being at the very heart of so very much I was thinking about. It is to him that I owe much of my ongoing interest in the history of the area.

You asked me about impulses coming from disciplines other than history. I think that if I am completely honest I should say that my first degree, the degree I started at university, was actually in psychology – I continued in my second year to study psychology as a single-honours degree. I sometimes think that even though I only studied psychology for two years, much of that stayed with me. At the heart of what professionally interests me rests the idea of personality, of biography, of personhood, of how people present, develop and change over time. I decided, however, that my real interest lay in History and German, and my BA was in these two subjects.

For me it is has always been important to have that engagement with language, culture, literature and history. So, I find it impossible to separate them one from another. My frustration is that I do not command as many languages as I would like to, so I still continue to try to acquire as many as possible. Language and the cultural insights that the study and acquisition of language brings are crucial in my thought processes.

2) Material culture studies seem to be a field, which is literally thriving in the United Kingdom. What are the sources of this boom? Is it the reaction to the linguistic turn, or the result of a certain neo-Marxian emphasis on materiality or a rebellion of artefact-centred disciplines, such as art history or archaeology?

I think this is a really interesting question. And you are right to identify this very noticeable turn towards the non-written and towards material culture. I think it is important to say that that turn has taken place first and foremost in the study of the early modern period. So, it is in early modern departments or rather within history departments and the early modernists working in them that we have noticed this turn taking place first. It goes back, in my understanding, to the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty first century and I think what you have identified in a reaction to the linguistic turn or what you describe as a neo-Marxian emphasis on materiality – I think they are all part of that new commitment. But I would also add to the mix the influence of new social history from the United States and of women's and gender history, as well as the fundamental turn towards a new type of Cultural History.

I think undoubtedly that the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that brought about in the 1990s, including an attempt to recover or perhaps even uncover different narratives of the historical past not simply rooted in ideology, played a part, too. In that sense, it is also partly a response to a crisis within Marxist history and historiography.

It is also a response to a decline of interest in (or as some might see it a crisis within) ideas of economic history. And that is something we sometimes forget: that the history of material culture is also an attempt to understand exchange, commodification, conspicuous consumption, interest in informal markets, and the marketplace. I think some of the most innovative material cultural history practiced today is by my colleagues at Cambridge, who bring a great richness to all historians by giving us new insights into the history of contact, exchange and trade. Much of this work involves histories of the technologies of exchange, of consumption, of self-fashioning and all the impacts that has on selfhood, during the early modern period.

All of this has added huge richness to our understanding of early modern life and culture. And so, I think, material culture is not a replacement for the political or economic or social, cultural history or the early modern. But it is a necessary, and I think a very valuable, element in our broader understanding of the early modern past.

3) In Cambridge, you teach a course on borderland studies. What concepts and approaches employed in the borderland studies and theory do you find particularly useful or promising for the future?

Yes, I have taught a final year undergraduate course on Borderlands (1521 to 1881). And it is a course that at its heart focuses on what German historians know as the *Militärgrenze*, the *cordon sanitaire*, a serpentine space that ran from the Adriatic to Transylvania and which separated the Habsburg lands from the Ottoman lands further south. I do appreciate that it may seems a curious way of approaching imperial history. What I try to focus on in the course, is how empire –so often seen as a well-ordered domain, a bureaucratic, hegemonic entity– was experienced, was lived, was acknowledged (or not) in the lands abutting the imperial frontier. What results, I hope, is a clearer understanding of social, cultural, economic, religious and political life at the changing interface of Habsburg-Ottoman encounter in the long early-modern period.

It can be very difficult to recover complex histories, I would argue, that are multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, unless we look at such borderland spaces – spaces that are significant in terms of size, in terms of population and really exciting in terms of what they offer us as a counterpoint to a naive teleology that still operates in much of our historiography that suggests development towards the nation-state. What I try to explore with the wonderful students I have in this course, is how we can take ideas from a range of different area studies and different historiographical approaches – from borderlands studies, borderlands history, especially in the United States history of the American Southwest, the space between the Spanish and English-speaking lands of North America – how we can take the ideas from postcolonial studies, applying ideas of not just Edward Said but Maria Todorova, Moritz Csáky, Vesna Goldsworthy, a whole range of other authors that have developed new approaches to the study of central and south-central Europe, and see if we can apply them to this part of the world for the early modern period. It is also important, where possible, to inform a largely monolingual student body, capable of reading literature almost exclusively only in English, of the richness of other historiographical traditions either in translation or by encouraging them to engage with sources in German, in Czech, in Hungarian, in Romanian, in Croatian, in Serbian, in Turkish, any or all of these where possible. And if this is not possible, by really making the best use of colleague historians whose expertise I draw on either in person or over Skype, who join us sometimes for these classes. Colleagues from Austria, Croatia and Romania have Skype-d in and answered the students' questions; this

is an incredible way of teaching, enabled by technology. I could not ever imagine doing that five or ten years ago.

The students really do work in this course as historians. There is no predominant counter-narrative or dominant historiographical approach in the literature with which, or against which, we work. There is no one way of reading what we study. And so the students are at first very surprised to find that they need to come up with their own theses, with their own approach to the problematic that we study and in that way I find it a particularly enjoyable course to teach. And I know from some of the feedback, that the students find it both exceptionally challenging but also very rewarding. And it has been really enjoyable to teach.

4) In this course do you also occasionally address or explore memory landscapes in relation to borderlands studies?

Yes, absolutely, some of the literature in Hungarian and Croatian is especially well developed in this area. A number of scholars come to mind here who have worked on the ideas of landscape, but also on ecological and climatic history and how we can incorporate this work. For example, in classic texts we read about Ottoman forces moving northwards towards Vienna and then we ask ourselves: how did they move northwards overland, or on water, before canalization of the Danube or before the regularisation of many of the riverine systems in the region. And so we draw on historical geography, we draw on the work of geographers, on climatic and environmental historians. We look at an array of records of household and village formation, from written, archaeological and other evidentiary sources. Then we also have those accounts of what it was like to live on a frontier. As people in the eighteenth century become more informed through cartography of the idea that they were living *in extremis*, that they were living at the 'end' of Empire, at the end of Christian or Muslim territory.

Yet being told that one lives *in extremis* had, we come to see, a real impact on identity formation and on understandings of martial abilities, of being good soldiers. We look at that as a concept that can be related to ideas that developed in India or in the Americas at the same time. We can draw on scholarship that really is global. And I think what has been particularly important for us in thinking about this has been the new field of *Verflechtungsgeschichte*, *histoire croisée*, entangled history; how we can look at micro and macro moments. I am thinking here of the work of historians like Francesca Trivellato and how one can take small communities, just a little village in the military frontier and use that as a way of encountering global connectivity. For instance, how foods arrived in

this part of south-eastern Europe in the eighteenth century from across the world. How, for example, a dye colour comes from the Americas in the pockets of a Croatian mercenary soldier who brings it back and grows indigo along the Frontier or how the potato was introduced by prisoners of war and a whole variety of things.

5) How does the cooperation between social and cultural anthropology and history look like today in Cambridge and in the United Kingdom? For a long time Peter Burke was paving a way in this direction. Cambridge also has a rich tradition of historical anthropological works by Jack Goody and Alan Macfarlane. All three of these scholars employed the term historical anthropology, which is still quite rare.

I would go back to my earlier discussion of material culture in part 2. So, what we find today is the growing work between not just the social and cultural historians in the departments of anthropology, history, archaeology and languages, but also increasingly between our museums. So, curators in the Fitzwilliam museum, for example, working together with colleagues in anthropology, in sociology and in history. They continue that level of cooperation and I think what has happened is that in many ways historical anthropology is now addressed through the material. So, archaeologists working together with early modernists and modernists or archaeologists working together with biochemists, for example. We had a colleague who was working on the composition of the morter between the bricks in the pyramids, looking at, for example, how milk was sometimes used as a binding agent. We can then extrapolate from that by drawing on anthropological biology and so on. How many cows would there have been? What type of grassland may have been needed to support such a number of diary animals? And one builds up an understanding of a rich social system.

Therefore, I think that Historical Anthropology most definitely continues, but it may be found in many more departments than was the case in the past. It still very much informs the particular form of history that we do and think about at Cambridge.

6) To what extent is the term Historical Anthropology still used in the United Kingdom? I mention it because in Central Europe there is a journal called *Historische Anthropologie* which has been published since 1993. Prob-

ably also thanks to this periodical the term has become quite established. Is the situation similar in the United Kingdom?

To the extent that social anthropology was, earlier in the twentieth century, a significant intellectual development in, and export from, Britain, not any more. I think that what has happened is that it seems now to be acknowledged as an important step towards different developments in cultural history. And I think, perhaps something that your readers will already appreciate from their reading of literature coming out of the Anglo-Saxon world, is that this turn to cultural history is quite pervasive, it is quite dominant, particularly for us as early modernists, and it is absorbed and it is also complement to terms like historical anthropology. Of course, one can still have conversations about the subject, but it is not per se, I think, a core area of study, certainly not at the universities with which I am familiar.

7) You have co-authored a book on the national movements in Ireland and Hungary in comparison (O'Reilly William – Penz Andrea. *Freiheit und Unabhängigkeit als imperative Postulate: Nationale Bewegungen in Irland und Ungarn im Vergleich (1780–1870)*. Graz 2006). Let me take advantage of your expertise in comparative history.

It seems that comparative history has a strong tradition at such international universities as the EUI in Florence or CEU in Budapest. It has also a strong tradition in Prague, at the Faculty of Arts of the Charles University where advanced students are trained and theses defended in comparative history. At the same time, comparative historians often express concern comparative history remains a rather minority stream in history research and writing. Moreover, since the 1980s the cultural transfer methodology and later *histoire croisée*, as well as other approaches, such as transnational history, have been elaborated in a certain critical reaction to comparative history. Comparative historians often think these new methodologies are not innovative enough. But it also seems clear there are some research fields, such as migration history or translation history, in which various approaches of relational history are highly appreciated and have turned out very useful and productive. What is your stance on these discussions, concepts and tensions?

You end your questions with the word tensions. And I think tensions are always positive. I think if we become too complacent in our approach, too reliant on one methodological approach, there is a danger that we suddenly become too

dogmatic as historians and we adhere to one particular approach, which is not always relevant or is not always useful in what we do. That said, I think the idea of comparative history is a catchall, an umbrella term because under it there are a whole variety of different types of comparative history.

You refer to one book I co-authored with a colleague from Graz a number of years ago now. And I have also edited a volume on Atlantic history which is a comparative history, too. I think for me at core, comparative history grows out of interests that are prompted by encounters with other historians. And I think one of the most important influences on me in this way was, in fact, that from the very first year of my graduate studies in the mid-1990s I had the real privilege of being a participant in Bernard Baylin's Harvard Atlantic seminar which met annually at Harvard, lasting two or three weeks, bringing together between 25 and 35 graduate students from all around the world. Each year, we were all interested in one theme or area, in the field of early modern comparative history or the history of the Atlantic world. My contacts with scholars, who at that stage like me were graduate students or young faculty, have completely transformed the way I think about history and the way I work as a historian. My ideas about early modern Europe were as informed by those meetings as they were by my own studies in early modern Europe. I met scholars, for example, who were interested in South America in the 1600s and 1700s, who were working on projects about Bohemian woodcarvers making religious objects in the late-seventeenth century that have found their way into parts of South America. I met scholars who were working on what for some scholars are seen as tangential or minor subject areas about missionaries or others who moved to Central Europe, but fundamentally how protoindustrialization, how the change in land usage, how ideas about rights, liberties, freedoms were informed as a result of the exchange of ideas and experiences emerging in a globalizing world. And I use that phrase "a globalizing world" to refer to the 1700s or even before that time. For me, comparative history in its first iteration is about historians sharing ideas and influencing the way we think about our work, forcing us to challenge and revisit the ideas we have. So you are right: there are obviously expressed methodological forms of comparative history. I think today, too, of the tension that exists between the colleagues who call themselves international historians or transnational historians and how they try to define exactly what those differences are. Is it about the period we work on? Can there be international history before the twentieth century, before the late nineteenth century? Is comparative history always essentially about integrative history based around thematic studies, conceptual studies or can it be about placing spaces or people side by side in a way. Now, for some comparativists that is not appropriate, it is not adequate, it is not

methodologically sufficiently developed or sophisticated enough and again you are right to identify there has been a certain critical reaction, as you say, to comparative history coming from some people.

If you ask my opinion as to why all of this has happened, I think that there is one idea, one possibility that underlies the great changes in our discipline in the last twenty years. And that has been the significant changes in communication and technology which has impacted upon all our lives; and I include in that cheap airfares, however damaging they may be for the environment, the fact that scholars can now travel relatively easily. I am talking most particularly about the period from the 1990s, particularly after changes in Central and Eastern Europe, beginning in the 1990s. Scholars now meet each other with great regularity at conferences, workshops, day-long events, and they exchange ideas. Email or Skype mean that we can have near instantaneous exchanges of ideas. We now do not dwell on detail, perhaps, as long as we might in the past. We now focus much more on the innovative, the novel, the turn. One example: think of undergraduate essays in history. When I was an undergraduate student we went to the library, we took books from shelves, we read them. Now most of our students read e-books, they google search, they use on-line resources. Students now often use libraries as social spaces where you have coffee while using your laptop to read or to write. That alone means that the quantity of material used by even undergraduate students is of a magnitude far higher than anything we would have used when I was a graduate student. And that, in turn, means that we use sources in a very different way.

Now, that brings in richness that means we can make dramatically comparative statements. We can relate things that are very local to wider contexts, to what some historians call the micro-macro exchange. But we must be conscious, too, that we are perhaps losing something in this process. We are losing a depth of knowledge. We are losing a critical vertical depth of engagement with sources and we are losing the wider horizontal context. I am not suggesting that we need to read every book cover-to-cover, but we do gain a greater understanding when we read in a more in-depth way and when we understand more than simply what appears to be the relevant phrase or section that we need to use.

So those are my views about the approaches you have asked me about, in the context of comparative history. As for me, I am much more fundamentally concerned with the challenges that we face as historians in the twenty-first century, at the time when we have a much greater ease of access to resources, much greater ease of access to colleagues and answers to our questions. And that in turn must obviously have a direct impact on what it is we are doing as historians.

Are we becoming very different people? Are we becoming more historiographers, perhaps, than historians? What might that mean for us?

8) William, you have worked in the field of Atlantic history for a long time. Let me move in this direction. The sweeping success of the Atlantic history has made some East-Central European scholars worried since they realize that the possibilities to contribute to this highly visible field are rather limited, as they tend to shrink to the migrations histories, missionary work, export of certain goods (such as textiles and glass) and receptions of new plants (prototypically potatoes) etc. To certain extent, it seems the Atlantic history focuses on the West of the West and leaves certain regions rather orphaned. Together with a limited funding historians but for example also cultural anthropologists face, these circumstances make them to focus on local history more than they would like to or than their language skills would force them. This creates a situation which certainly does not seem ideal. What is your opinion on this?

Atlantic history or the idea of Atlantic history began very late in the 1980s, really in the early 1990s, and at the vanguard of that idea was the Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn (*1922) whom I have mentioned before. And as a prize-winning historian Bailyn had, I think, come to understand that it was necessary to break early American history out of an Anglo-centric perspective, to correctly complicate the narrative.

And then many years after the first meeting of the Atlantic seminar at Harvard, which I referenced earlier, there was an attempt to move the North Atlantic history further and to incorporate the southern Atlantic which is a very different historiographical situation requiring different language skills and knowledge.

So, Atlantic history, it is correct to say, became an important area for many scholars in the 1990s and we can see evidence of that in the hiring patterns of north American, and ultimately European universities: positions previously advertised as lectureships in early American history or early modern Europe came often to be advertised as lectureships in Atlantic history. And it seemed to be a very neat way of addressing this complexity, the idea that we need to be more than one type of historian, that we cannot just be interested in early New England, or Jamaica, or England. We should be interested in where the people who settled in New England came from, so we also need to know the 'other side' of the Atlantic world. And for that reason, I think, Atlantic history began in a well-intentioned way to broaden the field and it moved us along as early

modernists to understand ideas of connection and exchange and not just to look at one side, but at all sides.

Already by the 1990s, there were debates about whether we were trans-Atlantic, cis-Atlantic, circum-Atlantic historians. One historian even said we are all Atlanticists, that we have all committed to becoming comparative historians. But what I find just as intriguing in the emergence of Atlantic history, when we recall that it emerges after that fall of the wall movement I described earlier, is that it emerges in a moment of uncertainty about the place of ideology and the influence of Marxist thought on economic history and on history more generally.

Atlantic History has now almost disappeared or at least certainly declined almost as rapidly as it appeared; it has had a twenty year lifespan. Now you will find that very few conferences take place that are specifically about Atlantic history, very few job vacancies are advertised for Atlantic historians. This is, in part, because it seems as if it burned out; it lost momentum. And having considered myself to be someone who gained immensely as a graduate student and thereafter from these contacts and the literature that came from this field, I am left wondering why this has happened. Has it burnt out because we have ran out of research topics? One tongue-in-cheek response is that, we did not realize the Atlantic needs to include places like the Philippines. Or other places that are not logically in the Atlantic but are part of the Atlantic system. And that it is not really possible after a certain point to consider events in an Atlantic context without considering them in a wider global context. Let us think of one example: the island of St Helena, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. For most of its history, St Helena was ruled over by the East India Company and so it was part of, administered by and governed over by officials in or connected with India, all the while in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean. Once we remove the ability to move between the north and south and other areas, we move beyond the Atlantic as a concept. Addressing the issue of Atlantic history, and acknowledging its shortcomings is also a warning for the limitations of other forms of history.

The second part of your question is a very important one and that is whether the emergence of something like Atlantic history minimized the relevance of Central and East-Central European history. And I can appreciate that scholars in the area felt that that might have happened. At the highpoint of Atlantic history, Central and Eastern Europe all but disappeared, unless it could be shoehorned into a study of the slave trade, of the trade in sugar or the history of religious expansion. I think what has become obvious is that it is not possible to force the relationship between Western Europe, the coastal areas of Western Europe and the Atlantic world. That is an artificial construction. Europe increasingly

operated as an integrated system. And it is not just the histories of migration that changed our views of that reality but also the history of proto-industry, of consumption in particular; of the history of production and the history of science which connected all parts of continental Europe with the wider world. It is not to suggest that Central and Eastern Europe became secondary elements in globalizing systems. Far from it. But they continued with a negotiated involvement, spoke to their own success in different ways. And therefore, once again challenged the notion of a teleological development towards an Atlantic centred narrative of history. As valid a question to pose is, why did these countries not seek to become involved. What inhibited or qualified their interest in this wider world, or perhaps led to local interest and concern being focused on sites closer to home? Could it not be that life was just as good in a different system? I think it means that as is the case with the very best history, we ought to be led by our questions and our sources, and not by a desire to work towards an historiographical tradition, and certainly not an historiographical trend.

(The interview was prepared by Veronika Čapská)