

## **"I am convinced that history looks different from each point of the world"**

**Interview with Harald Heppner**  
**Initiated by Greta-Monica Miron**

What triggered your interest in history? Why did you choose history as a profession?

Beginning my studies, I intended to become a diplomat and not an historian. But as a preliminary need for the entrance at the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna, the discipline "History" seemed to be more attractive than "Law Studies" or "Economic Studies".

Since my adolescence my interest in history has always been based on a philosophical and theoretical approach. Therefore, I finally dedicated myself to pursuing knowledge deep beyond the "normal" historiographic horizon.

Did you have models in your formative/student years, are there historians who influenced you?

My main academic teacher, Ferdinand Hauptmann, influenced my own profile deeply, and I learned what I should do and what not. He was born in Styria (the same region as myself), and he had collected a lot of experience in Communist Yugoslavia where he was first collaborator in several archives and then professor of Modern History at University of Sarajevo. In 1970 he came back to Austria.

Why did you choose South-Eastern Europe as a research area?

It was not my intention, but a coincidence. While I was studying at the University of Graz, the discipline "South Eastern European History" was established, and I found it interesting and started with a half-day job at the department. Then I remained there for more than 44 years – from an assistant status until I obtained a professor position.

You approached from different perspectives the history of this area at different times. What concepts did you use?

South Eastern Europe represents a quite interesting area based on the following factors: 1. Older and newer domestic elements, 2. A lot of influences coming from outside (all directions) and 3. A confluence of these two categories throughout the centuries. Therefore, I am in favor of studying,

reflecting and teaching the main phenomena which allow us to understand the complex situations, in all countries, all periods from the late antiquity up to the present.

My approach consists in getting experiences with several periods, topics and kinds of public, i.e. I do not like to remain at one fixed area of interest and activity. Nevertheless, my favorite period is the long 18<sup>th</sup> century because in this period we are able to detect the most important roots for the phenomena and problems in the present – both in South Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

What about the research method?

Without including the geographic background you cannot seriously work in the discipline "History". Thus, you must get some emotional contact to the area, i.e. know the countryside, the mentality of the inhabitants and their life style in the present. Then you must estimate the human dimension as the highest category not only in history, but also for historiography. What are the reasons for studying some more or less abstract aspects (dates, facts, processes, sources etc.) when you do not consider that all individuals in the past and present could – virtually – be our contemporaries, our neighbours?! In addition, my research practice relies as much as possible on approaching the subject from outside, not only for the work itself, but also for the performance, i.e. the question: what is the relevance of my research and to what kind of public is it destined and how should I manage the information so as to facilitate understanding?

I know you are acquainted with Romanian historiography. In your view, how is Romanian historiography positioned with regard to other historiographies in the area?

I think, the category "National historiography" is a construct, not a reality, because each of the nationally organized horizons consists of different traditions and varieties, depending on the affiliation to a generation, specific social strata, ideologic backgrounds and other factors. Historians are a professional collective, but also particular individuals themselves. Therefore, I would prefer to answer in another way.

Most of the books and articles in Romania contain some historical data referring to the Romanian territory or the Romanian nation. We may observe this practice in all the other countries too. For reconstructing, understanding and explaining history, the focus on national aspects is without any doubt insufficient – you must look at the relations between regions, periods, social strata, concepts and problems. Only then may you get deeper knowledge

about the secrets of our world which is changing every day, from yesterday, to today, till tomorrow.

Looking at the regional dimension of Romanian history, there is a large plurality because Romania as a state consists of several territories with different profiles; you may not find anything similar in the other countries of East Central and South Eastern Europe.

**How about in the broader context of European historiography?**

I do not think there is any European historiography, because the diversities between – for instance – British, French, German or Russian Studies are evident. The topics are not all the same, the methods differ, and also the kind of writing (and reading) cannot be compared. Therefore, it depends on each person and on each particular country's profile.

In Western countries you can get more titles with innovative questions and alternative methods, but you must have a lot of patience in finding information on "Eastern" subjects in "Western" studies.

**Do you think that the history of South-Eastern Europe looks different from Graz, Sofia or Ljubljana?**

Yes, I am convinced that history looks different from each point of the world. On the one hand, we can focus on the diversities; on the other hand, we might prefer the similarities. For Graz "National History" has no comparable function to Sofia or Ljubljana because the Austrian nation started to grow only after the Second World War. In addition, we have to consider the relevance of geostrategy: Ljubljana is quite nearer to the Mediterranean area, but has no contact to the Carpathians. Graz and Ljubljana are part of a specific European area, where Slavic, Romanic and Germanic elements come together. In Sofia we can find the weight of traditions of the long Byzantine and Ottoman periods.

**How do you view the involvement of the historian in the public debates of his time?**

This is a fundamental question because it refers to the menu of functions of historians in front of the society. Most of the activities done by historians concern only themselves and their world (studies, researches, academic programs). In addition, the wider public may be interested in historical information offering some orientation in favour of regional or national identity. When historians produce not only reconstructions of the past, but

also interpretations for understanding the present, providing some help for predicting the near future, they should be involved in public debates! I am convinced that historians would principally be able to make some aspects visible in this context. But they are not educated for this ambitious goal and, normally, they are not asked to participate in debates.

In my opinion, some special study programs should focus on this need, but it is absolutely necessary to be aware of the danger that the messages may legitimize political agendas or actions. Science has the job of enlightening and not of collaborating with political systems. Therefore, science must always keep a critical distance from all kinds of ideology.

What is it that makes the study of history relevant to this day and age?

Without knowing the past, you cannot understand and explain the present and find reasonable ways to shape the future. I am optimistic and would like to emphasize that: the world with the actual profile cannot survive without history and without historians.

You have taught at Graz University for decades. What changes do you think have occurred in teaching history during the years?

We may notice a lot of changes: the influences of the electronic media, the process of European integration, the economisation of the academic world and the profile of the actual young generation. The interest in history does exist, but the knowledge level of the students has become quite moderate. The reestablishment of a higher human education must be the most important precondition for the human life of the next generations.

You have been a PhD supervisor for Romanian candidates working on topics regarding Romanian history. Could you please comment on the dynamics of this interaction?

Romanian students are well educated, accurate in their work, and quite polite as well. Therefore, they must not be led but only guided.

What could you say about the Austrian students interest in Romanian historical topics?

The interest of Austrian students' concerning Romanian history depends on their knowledge and memory: if they don't have any idea of Romania and the Romanians and their very interesting history and beautiful country, there is no

remarkable interest. After getting some knowledge and perhaps some personal impressions of the country and its inhabitants, they develop another relation to the subject. Therefore, several of my students researched Romanian history and frequented Romanian archives and libraries.

In 2011 you organised in Graz the 13th International Congress for 18th Century Studies. How would you describe this experience?

This experience was very useful. It was my own decision (in the name of the Austrian Society for 18<sup>th</sup> Century Studies) to bring the congress to Graz, and I knew in advance how much work it would involve.

From the beginning, I found resonance with and help from the rector of the university, from the mayor and from the regional government. On the whole, we worked for three years on the preparation of the congress. Three languages were admitted (English, French and German). The hardest time was in the last months, as the final details had to be fixed. Around 1,000 people from 40 countries came, and the majority remained for the whole duration of the congress. We did not only have to manage the academic program, but also a large cultural program. During this time I used a special calendar: all was scheduled either before or after the congress.

Afterwards, we got a very satisfying evaluation from more than 500 contributors, and the organizing team saw that our ambitious goal had been achieved. But the congress experience also emphasized a trivial fact: all people cook with water.

Last year you founded SOG18. Which was the concept behind it, the aims you followed?

With some colleagues from five different countries, we founded in 2016 the Society for Eighteenth Century Studies on South Eastern Europe at the University of Graz and we are interested in attracting further members. The aims of this initiative are to produce more international and interdisciplinary results, to focus on new and attractive subjects, to stimulate the collaboration with specialists in the area and with specialists in other periods. Although the 18<sup>th</sup> century seems to be far in the past, in this period there started the modernization of the world, with all its consequences for today and tomorrow.

Do you think that in recent years the interest in the study of history in general and of East and Southeast European History in particular has increased or declined?

We have to distinguish between several aspects. The quick rhythm of our post-modern life more or less forces all individuals to concentrate on the "Here and Now"; therefore, people do not have enough time to reflect on which history knowledge could be useful for understanding better the actual development. In this context, "History" functions as nothing more than a marginal field which could sometimes be used as a source of entertainment without any commitment (See a lot of TV series). On the other hand, people show interest in history for looking behind the scene, for understanding what is real and what is only show. In my opinion, we are taking part in an accelerating process, and the importance of history is growing slowly, step by step.

Concerning East and South East European History, we can observe the following: in the perspective of the general public, this topic got more attention as the former political systems had broken down. In the academic public of the Western countries, (except for the people working within the subject area), the persistence in conserving traditional horizons has been evident for generations (partly as one of the knowledge organisation effects in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) – Eastern and South Eastern Europe represents something outside of the western sphere – for me in the era of European integration an expression of a provincial and anachronistic view! The solution for this unsplendid isolation resides in focusing on the similarities and not on the diversities between "East" and "West". Such a step requires the historians of this part of the continent to leave behind their dominating national focus in favour of something larger and more relevant for all of us.