

# EDITORIAL – CRITICAL HISTORY WRITING AND THE ‘OTHER’ EUROPE

Faced with the challenges of 2020, *Dějiny – Teorie – Kritika / History – Theory Criticism* has enhanced its commitment to open access scholarship by significantly reducing the time period between publication and making its content freely available, as well as by publishing tips for scholars working from home on its journal website. This year’s second issue presents fresh academic voices that take a critical stance towards earlier work in their respective fields and point to a variety of important aspects of Central European historiographies that were long overlooked.

In their article on the politics and practice of criminalizing the Roma people, Pavel Baloun and Jaromír Mrňka expose long-term continuities in the approach to and the persecution of people who did not meet the contemporary dominant criteria of honest and productive work. The authors emphasize that these tendencies and mechanisms preceded the Nazi seizure of power and occupation of Czechoslovakia.

Jakub Střelec’s study explores the project of liberal subjectivity as a model constructed by scholars for western Europe and asks how it compares historically to the societies of the former Eastern Bloc. He also discusses what new stimuli and methods for the study of the so-called psy-disciplines have been brought by the recent material turn.

Jan Seidl draws attention to editorial strategies in the genre of old postcard reproductions, which has enjoyed popularity since the 1990s. He points out that postcard editors have primarily been interested in physical places as historical settings for contemporary lives rather than in the communicative levels of pre-war postcard messages, many of which were written in German. Postcard

messages written in German have been downplayed. Jan Seidl suggests an alternative approach, which would give precedence to individual people, their experience and their voices.

As a timely invitation to dialogue, I would like to highlight the essay *Where Does the West End?* by Pavel Himl, in our Discussions and Disputes section. It draws attention to structural asymmetries in international research and to their theoretical framing, but also to how these asymmetries are experienced and perceived by individual scholars. The editorial board believes that Pavel Himl's text addresses important problems that concern both local and foreign scholars and has therefore decided to publish it both in English (in the printed journal) and in Czech (on line).<sup>1</sup> His essay can also be read as a generational message and a statement with significant potential for attracting reactions.

Current mid-career scholars in the 'Other' Europe belong to a generation that grew up behind the Iron Curtain; their opportunities for learning foreign languages other than Russian, especially from native speakers, were limited. They spent their formative years in the midst of the economic shocks and distress of the transition to the free market economy. Many of them turned into passionate polyglots eager to enter into conversations with colleagues from abroad. They criss-crossed Europe and beyond with backpacks full of long inaccessible books, all too often bought at the expense of food. It is disquieting that the availability of scholarly literature in non-western countries has not sufficiently changed, despite the onset of the digital era. Enormous barriers remain where access to research results is concerned. Moreover, scholars of the 'fall of the Iron Curtain' generation often lent their rather invisible voices to the canonical western authors whose works they translated and thus actively mediated in their home countries.

As Pavel Himl indicates, this 'fall of the Iron Curtain' generation of scholars initially largely accepted the discourse of 'catching up' with western scholarship, yet they have become increasingly aware that this may be a 'mission impossible'. Scholars from the post-socialist countries and other non-western regions remain unable to overcome the asymmetric paradigm through any efforts of their own: to do so would clearly require systemic changes addressing inequalities in research globally. This experience extends beyond the national (and significantly state-funded) academic communities of the post-socialist countries and should encourage broader comparative debates and critical reflection.

1 The on line version of the journal Dějiny – Teorie – Kritika / History – Theory – Criticism can be accessed at <https://www.dejinyteoriekritika.cz>.

We may, for example, ask what other theoretical frameworks and concepts can be productive in analysing, discussing, and potentially changing asymmetries and inequalities in research, such as the concepts of excellence, race, generation, gender, Mathew and Matylda effects, etc. It should also be noted that the concept of Europe tends to be employed in a simplified manner in many scholarly monographs, including the influential work *Provincializing Europe* by Dipesh Chakrabarty. A more nuanced approach is needed that would do justice to various parts of Europe which have been or continue to be marginal, economically and politically weaker, underrepresented in research and study programmes, etc.

In his conclusion, Pavel Himl encourages non-western scholars to display more self-confidence. As Editor-in-Chief, I would add that no one can free us from the responsibility of cultivating good practice. As Pavel's bilingual essay does, we must keep looking both abroad and at home and, with this dual perspective, continually demand equality and transparency in academic practice.

As I was putting the finishing touches to this Editorial, many countries – including the Czech Republic – found themselves witness to increasingly frequent mass gatherings against Covid-19 restrictions; these protests have been accompanied by a disquieting rise in the collective use and downright abuse of historical symbols (in Prague specifically these have included armoured horse riders, motifs from coats of arms and national flags, and even shockingly disrespectful use of the Star of David).

These recent events seem to add to the urgency of contemporary questions, such as how we as historians should navigate between the pitfalls and shortcomings of nationally- or globally-framed historical narratives or how we can analyse the historical dimensions of local problems without potentially feeding nationalist agendas. Notwithstanding the risks, it seems clear that if history scholars fail to raise their critical voices loudly enough and enter public debates readily, that space will be promptly filled by other people pursuing their own interests, be they nationalist, political, economic or other.

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