

Culture and Politics in a Historical Europe

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It is thought provoking that it was the West's modern project in the 20th century that almost eliminated history in much of education and the social sciences while at the same time political and cultural development in the last decade in Europe has strongly emphasised the necessity of a historical perspective. The conscious and unconscious mythologising of the past, which powers of state, organisations and minority groups often practice in order to further their own interests, can only be revealed, if researchers are able to work both synchronically and diachronically. To work historically with the concept of cultural complexity calls for different forms of historical analysis than we find in the traditional historicism of the 19th century until today. One of the challenges we are confronted with lies in developing a form of new cultural history or historical cultural analysis.

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What can European ethnology most obviously concern itself with in relation to the Europe we see today, and in relation to what those disciplines closest to us study? What is it that ethnology, and European society today, needs with regard to knowledge, problems, and answers? What gaps are there to be filled, and is it states, majorities, minorities or ethnologies, who should define these gaps?

I have my doubts as to whether an answer to that type of question can influence future research to any degree. On the other hand I am personally optimistic on behalf of ethnology, while at the same time believing that it is dangerous directly to allow the subject's main topics to be decided by political trends, even though the present neo-nationalism and political ethnicity are experienced as extremely powerful phenomena, when we find ourselves in the centre of them.

My optimism is based on the fact that there is both a need in today's Europe – and since 1989 also possibility for – a critical historical and cultural perspective if we are to understand many of the phenomena with which we are surrounded. On the other hand, it seems to me that ethnology would maybe have greater importance, if one addressed socio-political sub-

jects not more, but less directly that some colleagues seem to wish. It is well known that sometimes circumvention can be the best route.

Waiting for the past?

There is something paradoxical in that it was the completion of Europe's modern project in the 20th Century that almost did away with history. This has been shown in the growth of the synchronic social sciences, in the realisation of the welfare state in Northern Europe, in the extreme economic materialism since the 1960's and in the so-called postmodern relativism of the West. The last ten years political and cultural development in Europe has, meanwhile, emphasised precisely the necessity of a historical perspective, that is to say, the opposite of what modernism imagined.

As so often previously, it was not the professional researchers who first became aware of the lost time. The Danish poet and trendsetter, Poul Borum, had already in 1985 said, in a TV programme, that humanity was, in his view, bound by things and by the past.¹ When I heard his comment, I immediately thought how strange it is, that anthropology has for the most part abandoned history and the material cul-

ture, which people continuously creates, and with which it surrounds itself. Borum suggested, that Western man is content to dream of the past, in the hope that episodes from the past will return. We have lost the experience of time, or rather, the talent of living with the past in the present. The project of modern life does not enquire after the ability to preserve or use the past as a part of ourselves.

On the one hand, Borum suggests that people are at least accompanied in their life courses, with parts of the past, which are still used to work out thoughts and feelings in their existence. Thus a contemporary situation cannot only be understood contemporaneously. This is a discussion, which both E. Durkheim and P. Bourdieu have touched on elsewhere, without having interested themselves more closely in the problem (Bourdieu 1977: 79 cf. Christiansen 1995: 114).

On the other hand it could be that Borum isolated a characteristic which has become more and more visible. A look at sales figures for popular historical accounts, biographies and historical novels confirms this hypothesis. The contemporary experience of a lack of orientation and interest in this lost past, seem to have a connection.

In 1991 the Portuguese author Jose Saramago wrote about forgotten history and modern man: "I believe that the basis for our disquiet lies in the awareness of our lack of an ability to reconstruct the bygone. And the result of our inability to do this is that we are tempted to adjust it." Powerlessness causes humanity to create *its own* quite special past. Others consciously use the past for purely ideological purposes.

Thus there is a need for researchers and authors, who are interested in what goes on in this process, and who can write testimonies in relation to some of that which could have happened in history (according to our convictions). Saramago is not talking about a naive and submissive addition of "historical facts", but about a support from necessary information from the past (our so-called sources)² with the aim of using history in our construction (understanding) of the present: "When I consider the past, I have a strong feeling that we are looking

at much *lost time*. The writing of history and novels, with themes taken from History, are journeys through the past, attempted travel books, and always with the same aim, that is, to be wiser about what is to become of us" (Saramago 1991). No one can naively just write History. We shape history; never from nothing, but always on a partial foundation.

Saramago's final sentence, concerning ourselves, seems to me to contain an important element. That is, that our preoccupation with the past could have a scholarly aim, but that it also – and at the same time – like all other literature, has the possibility to make us wiser about life as it is lived here and now, and thereby maybe equips us a little better on our journey into the future. This is also true concerning our ability to relate to political change.

Europe's lost past

Saramago talks about a form of mental disquiet that results in a demand for literature, which especially fiction writers have been aware of and satisfied. Some of the background for this disquiet can most likely be found in both the upheavals in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in the fact that clearly defined goals are lacking in the welfare democracies of Northern Europe in the past few decades, after these democracies have fulfilled nearly all imaginable material desires of their nations.³ P. Niedermüller (1994) has indicated a connection between cultural uncertainty in European post-socialism and the particular form of neo-nationalism, which we see in the former Eastern bloc countries.

In fact it has always been difficult to determine what Europe is, but in recent years it has become clear to many, that it is impossible to refer to Europe as very much other than an idea (Boll-Johansen & Harbsmeier 1988). Europe is not "a culture" and can hardly be regarded as a plurality of defined cultures within a precisely defined geographical space. The political displacements since 1989 have shown by numerous examples how many different cultural tendencies of strange provenance are slotted together, how old historic situations in new contexts suddenly have topical importance, and

how different groups use and misuse history for many different purposes.

Europe cannot be compared to the “melting-pot” of the USA at the end of the last century. Perhaps some might say that Europe has just “melted” considerably more slowly than North America in the 17th–18th century, or is of a different character, but then the metaphor loses its force. Historians of civilisations, leaders of state and humanist educators have attempted to refer to Europe as a unity, with a common background in the Orient or Greece, as a dynamic plurality of self-determining national states, or as a unity of “folk”-communities. This type of explanation has more or less voluntarily become the scholarly ballast for most educated people. These forms of the understanding of Europe are, however, examples of highly partial histories, as well as being extremely normative.

Even the idea of a continuity from ancient Greece is in many areas a constructed continuity, where a thousand years of everything other than Hellas has been elegantly left out. The state/nation dynamism and the unities of autonomy are the trademark of modern growth-oriented nation-state thought processes, which hardly give a meaning to use before Napoleon, and the idea of Europe as different *Völker* with certain common characteristics, is a left-over from romanticism's political project. Even though the explanations have roots in the history of ideas, theories of power and folklore, they are not in themselves historical. By this, I mean that they refer to concrete phenomena and intellectual processes, while by and large, being taken out of their historical context. These explanations are a type of abstraction, which, under the mask of objectivity, postulate a form of European unity and totality. They are ideas which primarily call for belief or commitment, and maybe, first and foremost, are examples of how a later era's politics and ideologies would like to be seen.

This longing to be able to legitimate one's own intellectual humanistic origins, a country's sovereignty or an area's boundary, which have been the characteristics of statesmen and nationalist writers, is, in itself, a political and cultural phenomenon, which can provide an

excellent object for analysis. If ethnologists wish to carry out that type of review of the situation themselves, as is the case in a few areas in Europe, then one can end up in the same difficult situation as some archaeologists, historians and ethnologists in many European countries in the period from the end of the 19th century up to the Second World War. This is a topic which W. Kaschuba (1996) has commented on in the case of Germany.

It is understandable that some researchers think that their insight can be of direct help in many of the unhappy political-ethnic dilemmas which face us at present, and that members of universities maybe have an idea that they can help the state, a minority group, or whoever else they think they might help. I myself believe that the history of our subject in many European countries, shows that this form of engagement seems to resemble politics more than perception. In direct political involvement it is usually politicians or civil servants, and not research workers, who control the situation. On the other hand, I believe that the mythologisation of history and its use in political strategy, both by majority powers and many minorities is an obvious field for – amongst other things – ethnological research (cf. Köstlin 1996). The French literary analyst R. Barthes (1969: 175) shows in his *Mythologies*, how an ideological distortion of reality happens in myth, and thus the way historical quality disappears. Any normative argument is, in itself, particular and historical, but in a mythologised form powers, interested groups, or religious authorities' arguments appear as “natural”, as something obvious, which needs no cultural explanation because it is evidently a part of nature.

The researcher can help to reveal what happens when reality is emptied of its content, whether it is the state or a minority that carries out this mythologising. It is obvious in many ethnic and national problems that much of the mythologising and distortion that also is carried out, can only happen, because people do not know the background of the phenomena with which they are confronted. The time dimension has been lost. Thus people are abandoned to the synchronism of politics, and thus ideologisation thrives, whether it is in the hands of the repre-

sentatives of the state or of a weaker group, which demands special rights. Thus the one part may have the advantage, while the other is driven out.

A mark of honour among engaged ethnologists has often been to stand on the side of the underdog. There are both positive and naive examples of this. However in the last twenty years of immigrant problems (in Western Europe) and in ethnic questions there are examples where immigrant groups have misused ethnologists in their political strategy, through reference to their "original" culture, and with the protection of our own politically correct tolerance regarding ethnic differences. Being different can clearly create serious problems, but in Europe and the USA today it can, in certain situations, be an advantage to be "ethnic", as we have become blind to cultural manipulation through our own culture's relativism. By excessively ethnicising one's own background it is possible to oppose the modern order, when experienced as threatening, because it is seen to remove all differences.

In such cases culture is made absolute. Ethnic characteristics and cultural identity are experienced as organically imbedded strata, which can, and must, never be changed – except voluntarily! Many of daily life's cultural confrontations come from both the minority's and the majority's claim to their unreflective "rights" to do precisely what they want to do at that particular moment, with an expressed feeling that this natural right is, without overexhausting reflection, everyone's right.

However, such a claimed right cannot be seen as sheer egoism alone. It is, in fact, a historical product via the European Enlightenment, even though those that claim the right are not aware of this. At the same time the viewpoint is always shaped by the actual ethnic dilemma, depending on which group of the population is being referred to, and it gets necessary nutrition from the European states UN minority policy initiated after the Second World War.

A humanistic ethnology

Here is an extremely obvious area of research in the intersection between the social sciences and the humanities. Even if a scholar has considerable knowledge of the ethnic differences in Europe today, I do not think that he will come far, if he only regards the problem synchronically, as is usual within some of the social disciplines. A field of study exists here, where cultural insight is just as necessary as historical perspective, right down to details. With all respect for colleagues in other disciplines, I believe that a historical ethnology should have good possibilities within such studies. If ethnology is to assert itself among cultural studies' researchers, literary scholars, anthropologists and culture sociologists, it is necessary that it has its own substance. And the common interest in culture is not enough. I believe that history must give the weight that is often lacking.

By this, I do not mean that history, in itself, should be regarded as a benefit. As with culture, history must not be regarded as an empirical field, but as an analytical perspective, called for in some investigations, i.e. various forms of the creation of identity within Europe. Here the aim is to use the past in order to understand present problems, that is – a specific use of the historical perspective.

On the one hand European ethnology is surrounded by social anthropology, which has very great influence outside continental Europe, and which, in many areas, has inspired the European/national ethnology. Many of us have benefited from this co-operation. Anthropology has, meanwhile, never really been a good friend to the historical perspective, since the dominating trend in British anthropology in the years between the wars in the clash with historicism saw it necessary to be extremely ahistorical (Chapman et al. 1989:3). This attitude has indeed changed in recent years, but there has never been a breakthrough of a true historical anthropology, which many of us expected 10 to 15 years ago. There are many reasons for this, not discussed here. It seems to me that the anthropologist N. Thomas indicates an important issue, when he shows how the modernisation of an-

thropology meant that the subject came to work more systematically than processionally, and thus conceptually had problems in directly incorporating history (Thomas 1989: 6, 121).

On the other hand ethnology is confronted with the particularly large and many-sided subject of history, with which we have generally had a strange love/hate relationship. However, there are no grounds for ethnologists to feel it necessary to have an opinion on a discipline which is so all-embracing. History contains various niches and traditions of study, with which it is both easy and inspiring to co-operate. However, if we look at the interest in the development of a modern cultural history or culture analysis, we can see that history has not been of first importance. I am personally a little disappointed that my friends in history seldom regard their historical work in relation to contemporary dilemmas, or bring their topics up to the present, but instead hand over these topics to political scientists or sociologists. Much is happening just now in many countries in the cultural historical field, but the cultural historical perspective is still in its infancy. European ethnologists have an obvious chance to make an impact in a historical cultural analysis by holding on to – though with a will to modernise – the subject's classical interest in history.

A historical world

If we acknowledge, that we, in our expectations and actions concerning the future, use our experience as a sort of directional signpost in the past – we are perhaps more steered by “seeing” backwards than forwards – then we are on the way to getting in contact with the strata in the subconscious, by which our thoughts, to a large extent, are directed. To think the present historically is to transfer this picture onto our professional activities. This is to say, both to recall that experiences or characteristics from the past are filed in “memory” as a type of “historical processing” (I know that the word isn't perfect), and consciously to accustom oneself to compare or engage the experienced present with the figurations or events in the past, of which one has knowledge, naturally with regard to the different prerequisites for

these phenomena, which almost always exist. It is the development of the ability to see backwards and then forwards again in how one regards “the other”, which is important for working with diachronic, and not only synchronic, comparative perspectives. One gets better at it as the years pass, and one's historical knowledge also increases in the process, as the motivation to reach back into the past increases all the time. I believe also, that a conscious knowledge of the past sharpens present experience.

When we speak of carrying parts of the past within ourselves, one need not only think of actual examples e.g. the problems many citizens from what was Eastern Germany have in using their old daily routines and ways of thinking in the new life among ex-West Germans, which has turned out to be a much greater problem (and tabu) than one imagined in 1989. The mental wall did not disappear, merely because the Berlin Wall was sold as souvenirs to Western tourists. We all carry much inner past, even though it cannot be connected with a particular year, or actual presence in a given locality. We have often only “been in a certain place” through reading, or through a story or film, and this experience can be fully used in the comparative process.

When the individual comes to consider the world historically and comparatively, we can, in fact, find ourselves in many places at the same time. In Riga one is, in some areas, in Lübeck and Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, and in Amsterdam there is an obvious connection to Venice, with the differences and similarities, which are shown in a comparison of these two merchant cities in what F. Braudel called the slow displacement between 1550 and 1700 of Europe's trade centre from the Mediterranean to the northwest corner of the continent.

The larger space is meanwhile, not so much something which exists, as something we create, according to the perspective with which we view the world. When we talk of Southern Europe compared to Northwest Europe or West versus East Europe we are not only talking of external limits or boundaries in Europe, but *also* about relations, and this whether we find ourselves in the Renaissance, in the Enlighten-

ment or in the years after 1945/48. Relationships define and connect boundaries, and it is immaterial whether there is reference to conflict, symbiosis or equivalent differences ("brotherhood").

Relationships force us to think constructively about both differences and connections. We have to ask in what context borders over time have become national or state boundaries, while still remembering the boundaries which have apparently become invisible. These internal and external boundaries have not always, in research, played a clear role in the time before the modern national state, and much indicates that they can, in the future, come to influence a possible future postnational time.

Analyses of socio-spatial connections are important for the understanding of history's partition of the world into delimited "places". The present relations between nations, states and economics are largely a cumulative expression for a historical territorial fight for resources, peoples and markets. Many of our local surveys can figure in this larger perspective, and thereby raised out of their parochial nature, while they, hopefully, still possess their local qualities, in the form of proximity and understanding. Let us look at an example:

In 1990 I had the opportunity to travel to Latvia and Estonia. It was an instructive tour, both because I experienced how much I needed historical advanced knowledge in order to understand only a little of what I saw, and also because I experienced the difficulty, at that time, in getting answers to my rather elementary questions in conversations both with the general public and with the authorities. In the light of this our own anthropological / ethnological discussions as to whether history can only be regarded as a people's own (culturally) perceived or imagined past, came to seem to be rather an abstract debate.

I speculated about what might come from a study of Riga, built on field work from a synchronic approach, as we often do without reflection in our own society. Because of the vast changes that the various groups in Latvia's capital city have been subjected to during the First, and especially around the time of the Second World War, I believe that many charac-

teristics of the town and its life, could only be made understandable, if such a study was also comparative and historical. Here I am thinking initially of the visibility of the almost invisible or unmentionable strongly multi-ethnic character of Riga. I think it would be revealing to try to reconstruct how people today, compared with earlier times, define themselves and have defined themselves and each other with regard to their work and their respective Latvian (Baltic), Russian, Polish, Swedish, German or Jewish background.

Knowledge of the previously extremely great complexity of the population, and the different groups' political possibility for influencing Riga's life, has also meaning for an understanding of the town's present spatial appearance. However locally one tries to understand the life, which is lived and has been lived in Riga, it has been played against a backcloth, which comparatively recently was in every way international.

Internationalism is, however, not the same as uniformity. The differences between the towns in Eastern and Western Europe were very noticeable. These differences demand closer studies of the actual towns in relation to their agrarian hinterland in order to be understandable. This would certainly bring us to the development of the manorial estate system in the east as a prerequisite for the consumption of bread in the western centre region around Amsterdam, and thus to the differences in the agricultural communities' ties to the land in the two areas of Europe. In Latvia the pressure from landed estates was very strong, and continued right up and into the 19th century, a time when the majority of peasants in Western Europe had become independent.⁴

However, it is not certain that everyone in Latvia today would be equally delighted to know the particularities of their history. Riga and Latvia are historically very different from the ethnically "pure" Denmark, at least since 1814 and 1864⁵; a Denmark which the present Latvian state looks towards with interest.

Riga's position as one of the eastern nodal points for trade in Western Europe in the early modern period showed itself, understandably, in the planning, art and architectural design of the town. Even if a researcher consciously



Riga's large town hall square with the new museum from 1970 for the Red Riflemen (photo from 1995).

wished to study the town as a local community, or as town history, and not consciously in relation to Europe, reminders of the past are obvious in the shape of decoration, churches and warehouses stemming from the town's position in a larger, and in relation to today quite different, spatial relationship. Such traces from times and conditions other than the present day, or the communist era, are seldom relicts alone. They are features from the past, which people, in different ways, live with in the present, although in another connection. Material manifestations have, as a rule, a longer life than the individual's memory. Some physical traces are understood and others misunderstood or intentionally distorted. But almost none of these features can be understood through their new context alone. Such forms of past modernity demand both a historical and a larger spatial perspective.

After the Soviet annexation of Latvia Riga became a shadow of its former self, but it appears to a foreigner that the authorities were

concerned about the weight of the past as it can be seen in the town's planning and architecture. That, in relation to the surroundings, excessively extreme concrete building (Museum for the Red Riflemen), which the communist powers' built precisely across Riga's large old town hall square and market place, stretching from the cathedral down to the harbour which opens onto the outer world, appears to the visitor as an attempt to tone down the town's ancient religiosity and history, and to remind the citizens of the new times. The new museum building and its site is, for the tourist, an example of symbolic violence, where the material culture, in the shape of Hanseatic/German town planning, can be so provocative that it must almost be destroyed!

In the present, certainly very difficult situation for the new independent Latvia, we see, meanwhile, a similar, though empirically different, attempt to create one united country. I am thinking about how the young Latvian state has made one third of the country's inhabitants

– the Russians – stateless, without citizens' rights. This is both interesting and disquieting, when one recalls that the "pure" character of the nation, which the state is striving for without a glance at its own history, has never existed.

From state-oriented historicism to historical cultural research

It is the case, however, that ethnologists cannot be expected to carry out all forms of research. We are part of a universal division of labour, but sometimes one finds oneself in so many layers of history that one must be in a position to pry them apart, particularly if others neither can nor will recount the histories; as was the case in Riga up to the end of "The Singing Revolution".

In the European Middle Ages there was, as is known, no feeling of history. People knew that the past had been different from their own time (i.e. heathen), but one did not generally take these differences particularly seriously. None was interested in how the ruins of Rome came to be there, or how life had been in classical times (Burke 1970). When the Renaissance discovered its history the central question was about the formation of history. This interest culminated in the 19th century in German historicism, which attempted to understand all phenomena through their development (origins, creation and end), with particular focus on the state as the dynamic element.

A historicist tradition of research questions how the European states, or ethnic groups, have become what they are. Historicism results, as a rule, in an individual oriented, state or temporal division of the field of study, in which the individual research worker becomes an expert in the history of the state, a group, or perhaps a certain era. Specialisation becomes obvious, and, in the research culture, the greatest prestige is often connected to combining one's own and other's detailed studies to a synthesis with regard to a certain epoch in the history of the state (commonly of one's own land). In common with many others, I find it useful to be able to look up events in a chronological history of the land in which I find myself. I must, however, admit that I myself have never

had an interest in writing a volume of the national history of my own country, in which it would be necessary to give the Danish state's geography the prime place over the social and cultural phenomena's structural properties.

A cultural history can, without doubt, concern itself with long sequences, but to my mind it is of prime importance first to understand cultural complexities, i.e. how and in what context do practice and culture collide, and what human consequences or possibilities does this collision engender. It is, first and foremost, insight into cultural and social processes which are in focus, not so much the demand for a chronological or exhaustive description. The new cultural history does not take a wider view of general history, but has, to a high degree, focused on apparently particular phenomena. Not in order to put them together to make a whole, but from the knowledge that one can only truly begin to understand cultural processes through rather transparent analytical examples. Here I am not thinking of the culturalistic wave which, in the 1970's and beginning of the 80's, gave so many studies of marginal groups like the poor, witches, criminals and lunatics, but of more concrete accounts of human and social phenomena, analysed with regard to existential perspectives.

Cultural research work today is interested, on the one hand in the so-called particular – especially in the "little" cultural detail – and on the other hand in considering the studied situation in relation to more general ideas concerning what role culture plays in social life, and how it should be understood (cf. also Scharfe 1995). It can also be the smaller investigation seen in a wider context, that is the challenge, and not the smaller investigation for its own sake, as many believe. Here, it must, however, be said, that the particular example can quite well stand alone, if it has the characteristic of a parable, i.e. if it can be read and used to set the reader's life, or general problems, in relief. This can be a noble genre.

The use of the past in the present

Ethnology has always been threatened by itself. Both because its practitioners have some-

times had a tendency to fall for the colourful specialities, and because others, maybe in a reaction to the many studies of apparently uninteresting details, have allowed society's political dilemmas to set the agenda.

It is clear that it is politicians, who give us money, and who possibly have hidden intentions with these grants, but it is not for the politicians' sake that ethnology exists. If it really is necessary to give a direct answer to the question, then it must be said that we should work for the benefit and pleasure of mankind. I believe though, at bottom, that we carry out research entirely for our own sake, and hope thereafter that others can benefit from what we say and write. And maybe this is not so bad as we are individuals who bear our times' dilemmas within ourselves. For me ethnology has to do with a sort of humanising of problems and questions. I believe that we are only able to understand phenomena, when they are made easy to grasp and relevant. That is to say, when events, tendencies, or what we call structures, are made humanly meaningful (cf. Christiansen 1992).

The research I am referring to is not just an unfeeling presentation of a phenomenon, but the history of ourselves, and the context of which we are a part. It is thus that we exist. That is to say by hearing the history of man, by experiencing how our world is spread out, and by having an opinion about it. The best within the genre, which in Italy and Germany is called micro-history, can contain these qualities. The micro-historical cultural analysis focusses on historical situations' qualitative character, often by giving perspective to several layers of meaning in apparently simple forms or events (Levi 1991, Medick 1994). Such case-studies of different conditions can – if reader-identification is successful – contribute to an expansion of a recognition of our own actions.⁶ The investigations often reveal characteristics in society, with another world view than today, where the researchers' historical reconstruction makes it possible to come close to otherwise anonymous human daily problems, hopes and dreams. Some micro-history has been criticised for its interest in cultural complexity and richness of detail which has deemphasized politics in soci-

ety (i.e. Chartier 1988, Kaschuba 1996). To overcome this problem it is, to my mind, necessary to set the little compact problem in analytical perspective. Not empirically – as the micro investigation would thereby lose its special qualities – but on a more principal level. This can be done, for example, by seeking the infinitely large through the infinitely small, and by connecting the historical exemplification to an understanding of our own social life.

A form of anthropologising of life is called for. Not primarily through the implementation of a social science method of study, but through awareness in present cultural history that should be directed towards general human relationships in their *different* cultural expressions. It could be studies of themes such as people's reaction to accident, authority and resistance, previous experiences' role in the course of life, varying meaning of work, or the clash between various perspectives of life. The important thing is, that we, in the course of research, say something real, instead of just talking in phrases and formula, which is – unfortunately – the easiest and most professionally acceptable.

I no longer believe that scholars should, from high motives, merely fill gaps in our knowledge, regardless of how obvious the case appears. Every filled gap reveals still more empty gaps, which had not previously been visible. It is much more important that readers can sense the researcher's personal engagement and disquiet. That is, where he finds himself in relation to his research, instead of hiding himself behind his subject or behind an abstract scientific goal.

Notes

1. Poul Borum, Danish TV, 23.11.1985.
2. Saramago emphasises that we always have things only in part when writing history. We confidently assert that we have, for example, written the history of a certain topic (a journey or an area), but we have always left out an enormous amount, as we all write from one certain angle. It is impossible to take all perspectives into account. Irrespective of how many books we write about a certain area there is always a large grey zone consisting of

- everything else with which we haven't been concerned – grief, railway stations, desires, eating habits, etc. History, as we create it, is always only the first book, or one possible edition.
3. The extremely materialistic Scandinavian countries have, in their understanding of the welfare state since the Second World War, almost mechanically supposed that more of the same is always better. This was possibly understandable, when the social deprivation of the period between the wars was still a living memory for the socialdemocrats, who innovated "the new welfare model". Progress is however today turning in the other direction, for example the destruction of the environment. The myth of progress depends on the belief that the quality of life improves because of technical and scientific advances.
 4. This apparently made it difficult for the extremely small group of Latvian bourgeoisie (who were for the most part German) to create a real national identity on the basis of peasant society, as the peasants, in contrast to the situation in Sweden, had scarcely become "bourgeois". The Latvian (material) peasant culture looked in 1900 still rather "manorial".
 5. The Danish crown lost Norway and Schleswig-Holstein in 1814 and 1864 respectively.
 6. This is only true for a part of microhistory. An existential reading of much of the work of the leading researchers is impossible, due to them aspiring to an almost over-intellectualisation. This leads one to remember British social anthropology in its most "scientific" period. This school has clearly inspired parts of German and American microhistory.

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