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ERÓS, Vilmos

## Towards an Anthropological Approach of Historiography

### A conversation with the Belgian historian, Professor Jo Tollebeek<sup>1</sup>

In the interview above Professor Jo Tollebeek recalls his family background, university years, the most important professors and schools who influenced his carrier. Being both author and editor of the "Writing the Nation" series he develops the main ideas behind this huge undertaking and writing historiography in general as well. In contrast to previous research he points out that scholars should concentrate much more on the anthropological/everyday aspects of writing history.

**- Dear Professor Jo Tollebeek, could you tell us something about your family background and university years?**

I was raised in a village in the center of my country, Belgium, in a family. My father was a medical doctor, hardworking and with a great commitment to his profession. My mother was more artistic, a little 'bohémien'. I went to school in the village. But when I was nine, I was to the Jesuit College in Brussels. It was a large school, with many hundreds of pupils, at which we received a classical education: Latin and a lot of the humanities, of which history formed an important part. In 1978 - I was soon becoming eighteen - I went to university. The Dutch-speaking part of Belgium then counted three universities, of which Leuven was the oldest and most famous. I had a sister there, who was studying law. That's why I decided to go to Leuven too. It made a great impression to me. At the end of the 1970s the years of the student revolts were over. But the great political discussions had not vanished. Moreover, the university turned out to be a universe of magnificent intellectual enterprises, with students exploring topics which were not restricted to the special field they had chosen for studying. I enjoyed the broad horizons (and beyond the horizon ...) I now discovered.

My special field of study was history. From 1978 to 1982 I was a student at the Department of Modern History of the University of Leuven. Our training was a traditional one, very technical and - to a certain extent - very 'positivist': the emphasis was on source criticism in its many different variants, as it was codified by Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos at the end of the nineteenth century, and

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before them - in 1876 if I am not mistaken - by the bollandist Charles de Smedt. Nevertheless we also got glimpses of the new developments in the field: we learned about the French Annales historians and their innovations, we read cultural history, we discussed topics from the theory of history. I myself was mainly trained as a mediaevalist. My first theme of research was the history of the Jews in the Late Middle Ages; my first articles discussed this history.

Once I had completed my historical studies, I decided to study philosophy at the well-known Higher Institute of Philosophy of Leuven University. For three years - from 1982 to 1985 - I read with my professors the medieval philosophers (Thomas Aquinas being the patron of the Institute), Kant and Hegel, the phenomenologists (the Institute was the owner of the largely unpublished Husserl archives) and the French existentialists. Again, my horizon was widening. I specialized in the philosophy of history.

**- Which professors had the most important influence on you?**

I want to mention two names. The first one was Reginald de Schryver, who has recently died at eighty. De Schryver was an early modernist, trained in political history. But when I was a student he was lecturing cultural history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a predilection for Romanticism. He was not a specialist, he was a gentleman scholar, an erudite and an intellectual. Moreover he was teaching the field which would become my own field of research: the history of historiography. De Schryver taught us about the classical Greek and Roman historians, about the mighty tradition of medieval chronicles and histories, about the renaissance and the Enlightenment historians, about the Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Burckhardt and Huizinga ... A new world opened for me, vivid and thought-provoking. A second professor I want to mention is the philosopher Sam IJsseling. He taught me to read the 'new' French philosophers: Althusser, Lacan, Derrida and most of all Foucault -- this splendid generation of philosophers, literary theorists and anthropologists who renewed the humanities in such a radical way. IJsseling knew what was happening in Paris, he shared this knowledge with us.

**- How about your after university carrier?**

After studying history and philosophy in Leuven I applied for a PhD scholarship at the National Research Foundation. I was given a four years grant, enabling me to do doctoral research in the Department of History of Leuven University. In 1989 I defended my dissertation. It was my first book: a lengthy discussion of the way Dutch historians as Johan Huizinga and Pieter Geyl had theorized their discipline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After the completion of my dissertation I remained in Leuven, doing postdoctoral research on nineteenth century historical culture, in the broad sense of that word: the way professional historians wrote history, but also historical painting, the historical novel, historical processions, the use of monuments, public history. In 1992 I left Leuven for Groningen, and Belgium for the Netherlands. I stayed there for four years, first as a postdoctoral researcher, later as an assistant professor. These years became important for my formation as a historian due to the group of brilliant cultural historians working in Groningen at that moment, lively discussing their research with each other. Klaas van Berkel wrote on the history of science and university history. Frank Ankersmit was

conceptualizing his essays on the theory of history (and political theory). Others were studying 'political culture'. I focused on the relations between the French romantic historians (Prosper de Barante, Augustin Thierry, Michelet) and the romantic painters and poets. We all studied culture conceived as 'representation'. These were wonderful years.

**- How came/got you back to the University of Leuven as a university professor?**

In 1996 I was invited to become the successor of Reginald de Schryver in Leuven. I felt honored by the invitation and accepted it, though with a slip of hesitation: the Groningen experience had been impressive.

**- What do you teach here and what are your teaching experiences?**

In Leuven I am teaching a general course on the history of the Low Countries, an overview of the history of historiography, a course on European cultural history since 1750 and part of a course on the history of cultural criticism. The history of historiography course is closest to my own research. As my predecessor De Schryver I want to bring the students in contact with the long traditions of historical writing, the different genres, styles and methodologies that historians proposed to have a grip on the past.

**- Which were and are the main points/directions of your research work?**

The central field of my attention is, as I said before, the history of historiography. I have tried to study this historiography in various ways. In some articles I was primarily interested in the political and ideological impact of the writing of history, for example in national history: the use of national 'myths' in the creation and legitimation of the nation-state, its origin and its supposedly continuous existence. We all know how nationalists still misuse the past. In other articles or books I tried to broaden the field by studying historical culture, or to study the writing of history as a cultural form which can be compared with other cultural forms, such as the novel. Since about four years ago I have also become interested in the anthropology of historical writing: the way history became a modern scientific discipline, the way a community of scholars is built in this discipline, the way new scholars are recruited and trained, the development of standard and routine practices etcetera. This kind of research requires a specific kind of sources, such as detailed diaries and other 'égodocuments'. In 2008 I published a book on the way history developed around 1900, starting from the extensive diaries of the Belgian historian Paul Fredericq, Henri Pirenne's collega proximus at the University of Ghent and the author of a series of reports on the innovation of historical practices at European universities in the decades before the First World War. Finally, my attention has also been directed towards the relation between history and memory.

**- You have participated as an author and as well an editor in the great research program of the "Writing the Nations" Series. What were your experiences and what is your opinion concerning this program?**

The focus of this large scale research programme, financed by the European Science Foundation, was the way national history has been written in Europe since the end of the eighteenth century. Together with the Italian Historian Ilaria Porciani, professor at the University of Bologna, I was responsible for the research on 'the institutions, communities and networks of national historiography'. So, our team of authors, coming from all over Europe, tried to map the institutions of national history (the archives, source editions, biographical dictionaries, historical museums ...), the communities and networks in which national history came into existence and the relation between the 'nationalisation' of the writing of history and its professionalization. The book in which the research is synthesized will be published soon by Palgrave. The programme has taken much of our energy and time. But it was also a great pleasure to work with often young historians from so many European countries. We are convinced that this collaboration led to new insights regarding the way national communities constructed their national history.

**- One of the basic objectives of this program is to pass the national/-istic point of view in teaching and researching history and historiography? How can it be accomplished according to you?**

Exactly. One of the main outcomes of the research was the fact that there are great similarities in the way the history of the nation-state is constructed in most of the European countries. The origin of the nation-state, the national heroes, the national character, and the battles which are considered to be crucial for the history of the 'Volk': these turned out to be standard elements of national historiography, whether it is written in Ireland, Italy or Greece. In other words, the comparative and all-encompassing approach of the European Science Foundation project unveiled that national history is a construction, a construction of nationalists, with mechanisms which are seldom unique.

**- One of the most acute nationality conflicts is the Flemish-Walloon opposition in Europe that may concern highly your closer vicinity. What do you think about it and what are the tools of history/historiography to your mind to help for solving these problems?**

The opposition between the Dutch and the French speaking groups in Belgium - between the Flemish and the Walloon - is indeed a nationalist construction, which is not new. Already from around the First World War Flemish nationalists (and those who hoped for a union between the Dutch speaking in the Netherlands and in Flanders) emphasized that the Belgian nation-state which had come into being in 1830, was an artificial entity, made by diplomats. They hoped to destroy this nation-state. To reach this political goal they used, as all nationalists do, history. They gave the independent Flanders they longed for a past of its own (with the medieval Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302 as a first highlight: the victory of the Flemish people over the French king and his knights). Since the 1970s, in a series of revisions of the 1831 constitution, Belgium has indeed become a federal state. The Flemish nationalists don't want to stop at this point; they want to split up the country and get autonomy for Flanders (and for the Walloon part

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of the country). The politics of the main Flemish nationalist party (led by the mayor of Antwerp, the main city in Flanders) can be compared with that of the Lega Nord in Italy: the (French speaking) south of the country, which is less rich than the (Dutch speaking) north, has lost the solidarity of the north.

Historians might and should point to the use and misuse of history by the nationalists. They should show the way history is transformed in a political mythology in this nationalist discourse, an exclusive mythology, giving no place to those who are considered not to belong to the 'Volk', to be outsiders.

**- Do you have any "credo"?**

My main credo is that we should defend the diversity of our research. Historians of historiography might study the writing of history as a political instrument, but they might also study it as a cultural form, as a cultural practice, or as a philosophy of history 'in motion'. We should try to understand concrete forms of historiography as ways of dealing with the past, from as many perspectives as possible -- with but one caveat: one should always try to understand this dealing with the past from a historical, contextual perspective.

**- What are your plans for the future first of all in your main field of interest, in historiography?**

The next years I will broaden my perspective, trying to work on the history of the humanities - the writing of history, but also archaeology, art history and, musicology, linguistics and literary studies, philosophy and theology - around 1900. Between 1870 and 1914 the humanities became the modern scientific disciplines at the universities which we still now today. I want to study the epistemic virtues (linking epistemology with ethics) and the characteristic practices of these new disciplines, using examples from all over Europe. What does it mean to focus on 'reliability' in the humanities? Why this collecting in an almost feverish way of all kinds of new material (archives, excavations, new images, travelogues ...) in these humanities? How was the transfer of knowledge organized in these new disciplines? These are the questions I want to tackle for the next few years.

**- Thank you for the conversation.**

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