eurozine

Violeta Davoliute, Natalie Zemon Davis

Babel is not the last word

A conversation with Natalie Zemon Davis

In order to give the people normally overlooked in history the credit she feels they deserve, Natalie Zemon Davis has developed her own methods of documenting history, which focus on the "lower orders" rather than political and religious figures. "What I care about is having found ways to get evidence for and tell the stories of people often passed unnoticed or treated as a statistic –– to make their stories speak to bigger issues in historical life and change."

Violeta Davoliute: During the last years of Soviet Lithuania, at the height of the popular movement, the writing and teaching of history was seen by many as a political and national project. At that time of upheaval, we felt that historical writing played a crucial role in an urgent process of remembrance, of recapturing a lost tradition and identity that was at least partially wiped out by Soviet–style modernization. I thought I would begin our discussion on ways of writing history with a definition of "tradition" from Hannah Arendt's book *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1968), because I believe it reveals some implications of different ways of looking at the past that are particularly relevant to the post–Soviet world:

> With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past. It could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear. But it cannot be denied that without a securely anchored tradition –– and the loss of this security occurred several hundred years ago –– the whole dimension of the past has also been endangered. We are in danger of forgetting, and such an oblivion –– quite apart from the contents themselves that could be lost –– would mean that, humanly speaking, we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence. For memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.

Today, one could argue that in independent Lithuania, we feel more confident of our place in the world, and that the need to anchor our self–understanding in a narrow tradition is less strong. Scholars today seem to be ready to "break from the chain" of tradition that has tethered them to the pre–determined aspect of the past as defined by the nationalist narrative of liberation from Soviet rule. There is a new interest in multidisciplinary approaches, in the history of national minorities and other subjects which do not quite fit into the

framework of "traditional" history. How do you understand tradition and the security it provides in terms of our understanding of the past? How can new ways of writing history "tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear"? Can you relate the current emergence of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of history in Lithuania and other post–Soviet countries to the "loss of tradition" described by Arendt?

Natalie Zemon Davis: I define tradition as ways of thinking, doing, and feeling that a social group inherits from the past. Some would prefer to say "believes it has inherited from the past", for, as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger famously argued, many political traditions, especially those associated with nationalism, are "invented."

I would rather go beyond the simple dichotomy of "invented" traditions and "real" traditions to suggest a different model. All traditions get handed down with some conflicts about their interpretation: I can't think of a single counter–example. Even the most ecstatic religious movement or radical political movement generates disagreements by the end of the first generation about how to interpret its founding ideas or how to fulfil its hopes.

So I would turn Hannah Arendt's "tradition" and "thread which safely guided us" into "traditions" and "entangled threads", and suggest that if traditions lay out a space beyond which people in a community are not supposed to stray, that within that space there can be different paths and room to dig deeper –– even to find something new while perhaps labeling it traditional. Innovations that expand the boundaries or redraw them in a different shape usually take something from what went before.

Western historical writing had two models from the beginning, with the political and rhetorical writing of Thucydides and the social and anthropological observation of Herodotus. By the Middle Ages, it had three master narratives available: the cycle of political regimes (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy); the succession of empires (Persian, Greek, Roman, Holy Roman, or Byzantine); the theology of the First and Second Coming of Christ. Organizing history around a "nation" seeking its political place under the sun started only in the sixteenth century and flowered only in the nineteenth. Even then, some eighteenth– and nineteenth–century historians continued to write "universal histories" and histories of "civilizations", albeit with a Eurocentric perspective.

When a community linked by language and/or common experiences, institutions, and customs has its history (or histories) rewritten by a conqueror, then it's not surprising that a national past will be affirmed in resistance. Osip Mandelstam wrote movingly of such a loss: "Your backbone is broken,/ My beautiful, pitiful century./ With an idiot's harsh and feeble grin you look behind."

But even a past that is "usable" need not be narrow, and good history should always be written with both a sense of closeness and intimacy and with a sense of distance and detachment. From your description of current developments in Lithuanian historical writing –– "a new interest in multidisciplinary approaches and interest in the history of national minorities" –– it sounds as though this is the good direction in which they are going.

VD: Can the question of tradition and its loss explain the differences of historical writing as practiced in North America and east–central Europe,

respectively? Are North American historians perhaps less troubled by the alleged "loss of tradition"?

NZD: Let me give examples from my own past, from my own generation that started to write European social history in the 1950s and 1960s. You will see that in many ways we were linked across the geographical boundaries of eastern and western Europe and North America. I'm thinking, for instance, of Edward P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class* (1962); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc* (1966); and Bronislaw Geremek, whose *Wage Earning Artisans in Paris, 13th−15th Centuries* first appeared in Polish in 1962, and his *Marginal People in Paris, 14th−15th Century* a few years later. I started my research in the 1950s, and my essays on the printing workers, artisans, women, and poor people during the Protestant Reformation in Lyon and in France were published in the 1960s and early 1970s. We wanted to revise the questions posed by Karl Marx and Max Weber. We wanted to follow and expand the paths opened by the French historian Marc Bloch through in−depth studies, based on archives and on texts, of the lower orders −− their lives, values, and resistance −− in bounded regions within Europe.

We were not opposed to the inclusion of politics or the state, but we didn't want to write histories that made political events and state−formation the main narrative and the decisions of political leaders the main agent for change. For me, in focusing on the Reformation, I was not opposed to the study of theological doctrine or religious leaders like Jean Calvin, but I did not want to make shifts in doctrine and the decisions of theologians and rulers the main narrative of my account.

For us, political and religious structures were always to be connected with social relations −− note I did not say "dominated by social relations", I said "connected with social relations −− and the decisions of the lower orders were always part of the story. In a famous quote from E.P. Thompson, we wanted to show "the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history".

All of us placed our case studies within a European frame and within the bounds of one state; this meant we could be aware of the different variables, like political control or population, or economic arrangements, which might be affecting events. But our goal was to understand social issues and social consciousness, not to understand "Frenchness", or "Englishness". If we made comparisons across a national boundary, they had to do with some thematic issue −− say, working−class style or religious patterns −− not with establishing a national history.

Did we feel we were doing something new? We certainly did, we were full of excitement for what we would find. But we had diverse relations to "national traditions". Edward Thompson was from an English family, which had spent some years in India, and out of that background, he had adopted a critical stance toward narrow nationalism. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie was from a French family, and partly reacting against his father's role in the Vichy government, also had taken a critical stance toward narrow nationalism. Bronislaw Geremek and I are from Jewish families: he had been raised by a Catholic family during Nazi times in Poland; my ancestors immigrated to America in the nineteenth century from Vilnius, Prienne, Bialystok, and Slutsk. Both Bronik and I as young people were positioned on the margins of nationalist traditions in our countries. In each of these four cases, there was

some experience that facilitated a break with a nationalist ethos.

But also we were all quite civic minded: we were all leftists in our politics in those years, independent by the time we came to write these books, influenced by Marx among others, but post–Marxian in the way we thought about our subjects.

VD: How is historical research different today compared to when you began your work? How have you changed in your own work? You are famous for having reformed the study of history –– what do you see as your main contribution to historical studies?

NZD: My own historical practice has changed over the decades and the field of history has changed and expanded both in methods and in topics. Perhaps the most important development in the 1970s was the study of history of women and what we came to call gender. From the beginning this field was an interdisciplinary one, and it gradually involved the exploration of women, relations between men and women, and gender systems in every aspect of life: demography and sexuality to political life and art. It drew upon the approaches of social history and cultural anthropology and literary studies; it considered the representations and the behaviour of men and women in different milieux, and it asked what difference gender relations made in historical change. More recently, other topics have come to the fore: comparative work on slavery, on ethnicities, immigration, and diasporas, and on other themes related to post–colonial studies. History of science has moved from the margins of historical enquiry to its centre, while the arguments raised by post–modern relativism have given new life to the historiographical debate about universal values and methods of proof. Globalization has stimulated new kinds of "world history" or "global history" quite different from the Eurocentric efforts of earlier centuries.

I can illustrate a few of these processes in my own life, for one of the delights in being an historian is the possibility of change and expansion. In the early 1970s, I began to add anthropological approaches to my social history. I was trying to understand festivity and symbolic behaviour in the early modern period, and social history did not have the answers. It was also the time I started doing research on women. So I began to publish essays like "The Reasons of Misrule" on turning the world upside down in rural and urban festivals, especially by young men. I did social studies of women's work in the sixteenth century, but also, in essays like "Women on Top", I considered women's roles and female symbolism in carnivals and in uprisings. In "The Rites of Violence", I looked at religious riots not only in terms of the social or geographical origins of the participants and the nature of their demands, but also in terms of the ritual or symbolic meaning of their actions.

Then in the 1980s, I was especially influenced by literature and film. When I wrote my book –– *The Return of Martin Guerre* –– on the famous case of imposture in a peasant village in sixteenth–century France, I had already done the work on the film scenario for *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*. So narrative and issues of performance were very much on my mind, and gave me insight into how identities were formed in the past and how events are told about and retold by participants and those that came after. A few years later, I wrote *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth–Century France*: here I took the stories people told to the king to get pardoned for their homicides and examined them not for the social history of crime –– though they can usefully be so studied –– but for the character of story telling among

peasants, artisans, women, and noblemen.

Finally, in the 1990s, my anthropological interests culminated in a book on *The Gift in Sixteenth−Century France*, where I used historical evidence to rethink some of the theories of Marcel Mauss; and my interest in the history of women took me outside of France and outside of Europe's frontiers. In *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth−Century Lives*, I compared a Jewish merchant woman who lived in Hamburg and Metz; a Catholic nun from Tours, who went to New France to convert the Amerindian women; and a Protestant female entomologist and artist from Germany, who did her most original work in the Dutch colony of Suriname. I loved being able to expand my comparative perspective to include Jewish women (the merchant Glikl wrote in Yiddish as had my own grandmother from Slutsk); and I was especially grateful for the opportunity to explore societies and people outside of Europe, that is, the Iroquoian and Algonquian peoples of Canada and the Indian and African peoples in Suriname. The experience of writing this book changed my sense of myself as a historian: I no longer situate myself only as a European historian: for every topic I take up, I think, "How would this be looked at by non−Europeans?"

What do I see as my main contribution to historical studies? I don't know what others would say. What I care about is having found ways to get evidence for and tell the stories of people often passed unnoticed or treated as a statistic −− to make their stories speak to bigger issues in historical life and change. I care about having found a way to express myself about them with both empathy and distance. I care about representing people of the past with some agency even in dire circumstances −− however their lives turn out. I care about writing history in which both power and exchange (as in my book on *The Gift*) have a role to play. I want very much to write a history that gives people hope, even while they shake their heads over the follies or cruelties of the past. I want to make them see how the past is unfailingly interesting in its human dimension.

VD: What are the cutting edge issues in history that you would like the next generation of historians to focus on? Can you mention the names of some young historians whose work you particularly admire?

NZD: There are so many younger historians whose work I admire I am hard put to name only a few. But I would mention the work of Lorraine Daston on the history of scientific thought, and her current study on the meaning of objectivity and subjectivity. She locates these issues both in the grid of practice −− the practices of the laboratory, or of photography −− and in the grid of intellectual argument and debate. I would mention the writing on medieval historiography of Gabrielle Spiegel, where an understanding of literature, philosophy, and society inform her interpretation. Caroline Bynum has done much to help us understand symbolic culture and the body in medieval society. In the early modern period, Peter Sahlins' work on the construction of geographical boundaries and on the meaning of naturalization in the Old Regime has implications way beyond the France in which he examined these matters. Dirk Roeder in Bremen has been a leader in reconfiguring immigration history so that it goes beyond the polarities of assimilation and tradition. Meanwhile, Gyan Prakash has written studies of society, thought, and sensibility in nineteenth−century India, which are models of interdisciplinary perspective and post−colonial insight.

As for the next generation of historians, I hope they will tackle the question of how to write histories that are attentive to the multiple perspectives available in

different parts of the world, while sustaining loyalty to some agreed–upon rules of evidence. That is, how to write a history that is both local and universal at the same time.

VD: You have participated extensively in conferences in central and eastern Europe and are involved in the activities of the Central European University. What are your impressions of recent developments in historical writing in the post–Soviet space? Do they simply mirror developments in the West or are they following a separate path?

NZD: I was in the former Soviet Union in the fall of 1989, just as the Wall was coming down, for a conference on the Annales school of historical writing. At that moment and in the next few years, I feared that some historians there, in their reaction against a coerced Marxist doctrine, were going to too great an extreme in rejecting Marxism, and anything that to them was connected with this school of thought –– including even classical social history. But then, as the possibilities for archival travel opened up, younger historians there have been doing fresh research and are doing some interesting studies. Women's history has gotten off the ground in several places –– it had been frowned upon by the Marxist orthodoxy earlier –– though I don't know whether the historical achievement here has matched the interpretive work done in literary studies in the post–Soviet world.

Some of the best post–socialist historical research and writing I know is coming out of Budapest, led by Istvan Rev and his doctoral students. That is, it draws upon interdisciplinary perspectives and topics found in the West, but is approaching them with questions drawn distinctively from the period of Communist rule and the command economy. Rev's readings of the constructed drama of spy trials and the post–Communist political funerals and reburials are a good example. Some of his students have done projects on the subject of tourism –– a fashionable subject among historians and anthropologists in the West –– but with a distinctive angle. What is the impact of "tourism", when the traveler has had political instructions to observe but stay aloof from the societies he or she sees? What was the nature of the socialist tourist? These are all terrific topics, which in part grow out of local experience.

So far, I haven't seen much work on post–colonial subjects coming out of the former Soviet bloc countries –– though this might be my ignorance. But I would think that this would be a fruitful enterprise, in regard to the former Soviet empire and other boundaries near to and far from Central and Eastern Europe. The Muslim/Christian border in Hungary and then in the Balkans; the presence of mixed populations of Jews and Christians throughout these regions –– such topics could inspire studies written with new interdisciplinary understandings, but drawing on local insight.

VD: What projects are you working on currently?

NZD: I'm deep into several projects on forms of cultural mixture, on the practices and mentalities of people who live between worlds. One is a sixteenth–century Muslim, a diplomat and traveler from North Africa, who, kidnapped by Christian pirates, lived in Italy for several years as a Christian and an author: this one is entitled *Trickster Travels: A Muslim between Worlds in Early Modern Times*. Another one, entitled *Braided Histories*, is a study of Jews and Christians, Europeans and Africans in the colonial and slave society of late eighteenth–century Suriname. Yet another project, here a smaller one, focuses on a late–nineteenth–, early–twentieth–century linguist from

Rumania, a Jewish man who contributed to folklore and language studies in Yiddish, Rumanian, and French: I'm calling this essay "The Unhappy Immigrant".

As that title suggests, these studies of people between worlds are not simple success stories. But I hope they attest to the possibility of people living with each other not only in cruel violence and hatred, but also in processes of exchange and translation. Babel is not the last word.

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