GRABE, WO DU STEHST: RECOVERING AN UP-CLOSE LOOK AT HISTORY, VIOLENCE AND RELIGION. A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR HANS MEDICK

Hans Medick is a retired Research Fellow from the *Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte*, Göttingen (Germany). Until 2004, he was Professor of Modern History and Historical Anthropology at the University of Erfurt. Prof. Medick is the author of numerous books and articles as well as the founder of the *Arbeitsstelle Historische Anthropologie* (Center for Historical Anthropology; together with Alf Luedtke) at the University of Erfurt. He has also founded or co-founded several international research projects: *Proto-industrialisation* (with Peter Kriedte and Jürgen Schlumbohm), *Family History* (with Karin Hausen, Michael Mitterauer, Heidi Rosenbaum and David Sabean) and *History and Anthropology* (with Robert Berdahl, David Cohen, Jack Goody, Esther Goody, Alf Luedtke, David Sabean and Gerald Sider).

In addition to serving on the advisory boards of several international academic journals, Medick co-founded the journal *Historische Anthropologie. Kultur-Gesellschaft-Alltag* in 1993 and he has served on its editorial board since then (since 2009 on its advisory board).

In collaboration with Benjamin Marschke he is currently editing a textbook for Anglo-American audiences: *The Thirty Years War from Up Close. A Brief History with Documents.*

Professor Medick has researched and published widely in the fields of social, economic and cultural history of the early modern period, but also of intellectual history and especially on the theory and methods of history.

FOCUS Why have you personally felt the need to invest so heavily in the interdisciplinary field of historical anthropology?

HANS MEDICK Perhaps I can best explain this to you by addressing some of the biographical reasons why I now call myself a historian and historical anthropologist. The most important reason is perhaps that I studied and began to develop my work interests as a historian in the West Germany of the 1960s and 1970s, a time and place in which a rigidly disciplinarian approach to history predominated. The German historical profession called and calls itself a *Zunft* i.e. guild, and it

practices many of the rituals and norms of constraint of a *Zunft*. Until very recently, you did not only have to undergo the PhD exam to become a professor, but the *Habilitation* ritual as well. These two rites of initiation into the profession are not without influence on the form of history that was and is still promulgated in this *Zunft*. It is an approach to history that follows a strongly centrist perspective: The state should be at the center of the historian's concern and the different forms of state activity should be the main fields that a historian pursues. The history of religion, too, was studied primarily as a history of institutionalized religion. For Catholic religion this means that many chairs for the history of this field were and are filled as so-called concordat chairs (*Konkordats-Lehrstühle*) which means that they only can be filled with a candidate after assent from a bishop or even the Vatican has been given. But the centrist state-oriented perspective refers, in certain respects, also to the history of industrialization and the move of Central Europe into Modernity.

In this respect, I was dissatisfied from the start with what I came to hear and learn from German university historians at the time I started my studies. Therefore, I engaged strongly in the study of philosophical and theoretical aspects of history. After beginning my studies at Cologne, I soon changed to the University of Heidelberg and took classes there with Karl Löwith, the German-Jewish philosopher who had been an assistant to Heidegger, but whom Heidegger dismissed in 1933 when the Nazis came to power. I also had the luck to study with Hans Georg Gadamer and with the young Jürgen Habermas there. The philosophical approach which I acquired at Heidelberg centered on an interest in methodology and theory. But I should also mention the inspirational seminars of the social historian Werner Conze at this university. Conze was, to be sure, a conservative historian, but also one of the few in Germany before 1968 from whom one could learn a view of history not exclusively centered on the state.

Looking back I would somewhat pointedly say that I became a mature historian, not in the Germany of the 1960s and 70s, but rather in England. This has to do with another biographical coincidence: I got my first job as a research assistant in 1964 at a

southern German university, the university of Erlangen-Nuremberg. The professor whose personal assistant I was, Kurt Kluxen, was especially interested in English history, and he soon sent me to England. He was a conservative liberal and in the spirit of the times he said: Go there, find a topic, make it a topic with which you can engage and try to meet colleagues there. And indeed I met exactly the right colleagues in London. Above all, there was Edward P. Thompson – a critical, social and labor historian who was just becoming famous after the 1963 publication of his great book *The Making of the English Working Class*. At the same time, I connected with Eric Hobsbawm and other English social historians, foremost among them Peter Laslett in Cambridge. It was their way of seeing things that I brought back to Germany. I would not say, however, that I applied all of their ideas in my dissertation but they continued to influence me later on in my work as a historian and historical anthropologist.

As mentioned above, while I wrote my dissertation I had the luck to get to know some of the most interesting critical, social historians in Great Britain at the time. They were concerned with more concrete historical issues than the somewhat airy subjects dealt with in my dissertation, such as *The making of the English Working Class* (1963; E.P. Thompson) or the relationship between *Industry and Empire* (1968; Eric Hobsbawm) or *The World we have lost* (1965; Peter Laslett). So when I had finished the manuscript of my dissertation, I thought I should apply what I had learned from the British historians to a new field of historical research that I could help to develop in Germany.

I should mention in this connection, however, that I belonged and belong to the generation of 1968. This meant at the time, that beyond my professional work as historian, I critically engaged the reform of my university and profession. Consequently, some of the professors in the history department, who were true *Zunft* historians considered me a dangerous element at the time. They even considered not awarding me the degree of PhD for my dissertation because it dealt with the history of the social sciences, which they considered a strange and improper topic for historians. In 1973, my first book was published. It was very well received in Germany and internationally. As a consequence I received a job offer from

what was and still is Germany's foremost institution for historical research – the Max Planck Institute for History – for a tenured position with complete freedom to define my own research project. I soon found two colleagues with whom I developed what was, at the time, completely new: a historical critique of industrialization, its theories and histories. We called the project "Proto-Industrialization." A theoretical book emerged from our debates, which was published in German in 1977 and then by Cambridge University Press in 1981 under the Title: *Industrialization before Industrialization. Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism.* The book was eventually translated fully into Spanish and Italian and partly into other languages.

The 1977 edition was only the theoretical blueprint. Peter Kriedte, Jürgen Schlumbohm and I wrote it collectively as an orientation and common denominator for the concrete field research – which the three of us wanted to conduct in various regions of Germany – on this long-term process of social and economic transformation. Of particular interest was the transformation of everyday life, from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, which was propelled by rural industries – in communities that were proto-industrial from the start. To engage the issue we selected communities in regions, which had early household industries (before the coming of factory industry) as an occupation. An example of such industry would be weaving carried out as an industrial side occupation to agricultural jobs. It was at this time and in connection with this project that we developed an approach to history that we in Göttingen, just as the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, called 'micro history.' But our approach was different from Ginzburg's in that we did not limit our analysis to cultural history or the history of religion. Really, we, as micro historians, wanted to bring together the interface and the interplay of the cultural, religious, economic and social spheres in the everyday lives of people and demonstrate how historical transformations impinged and molded their lives in the long term.

This is the key idea behind my research project on the community of Laichingen in Württemberg from the seventeenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. But as you know by now, I am also a theoretically oriented historian, and I sought out a social theorist with whom I could argue – Max Weber – and his famous writings about the Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism.

The small town of Laichingen on which I centered my research is situated in a backwoods region of Southern Germany, which is still called "Swabian Siberia." There, it is so cold in winter that agriculture suffers so greatly that the inhabitants from the Middle Ages onwards have had to take on an industrial by-occupation to survive. I went there and tried to see whether Max Weber's thesis on the Protestant religious ethic as prime mover in the origins of a capitalist "spirit" and of capitalism as a mode of life and production could be verified. I faced the paradoxical question: Why did the people of Laichingen in the Early Modern period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries develop a Protestant ethic that fully squares with the postulates of Max Weber, but never a spirit of capitalism? Why did a group of homegrown entrepreneurs not develop there until the second half of the nineteenth century, so that factory-based industrial capitalism was only introduced by Jewish entrepreneurs from the outside very late? This is really the question that kept me busy, and which I researched, not as an abstract theoretical problem, but rather as a problem affecting people's individual lives.

My Laichingen book which emerged from these studies first appeared in 1996 under the title *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1700-1900*. It is based on the analysis of the records of a whole town's population over three centuries – a small and rural town which had about 2000 inhabitants around 1800. I discovered that a specific form of religion, which I called Lutheran pietism, was of utmost importance for the men and women of Laichingen in their everyday lives and work. They were Lutheran at heart – seeing the Bible as the starting point for every religious activity – but Pietistic in seeing personal awaking, personal calling and the cultivation of their personal calling as one of the central tenets that individuals should aspire to in their lives. What I found out in my studies on Laichingen was not a "capitalist spirit," but a religiously molded collective mentality, which, there and in the whole of Württemberg, followed and still follows the motto "*Schaffe, schaffe, Häusle bauen*" – work, work and build your house.

This ethic was not a secular ethic but a religious ethic at its heart. One of the primary results of my book is perhaps interesting even as a concern for contemporary global history. Its *Überlebenskultur*, its religiously conditioned culture of survival, influenced the people of Laichingen right into the second half of the twentieth century. It influenced them not only in developing a work ethic, but also in practicing a concept of precise work, of doing your work properly, diligently, inventively and as precisely as ever you could. This specific type of work ethic seems not only characteristic for Laichingen, but for the German *Bundesland* of Wuerttemberg as a whole. It is an essential ingredient of what has made this region of South Germany relatively successful within the German economic field until today. And indeed, it may be said that this work ethic is of a certain global significance in the competitive world economy of today.

In this respect, I once said in a discussion that "The way from the Laichingen weavers to the industrial auto workers of Daimler Benz at Stuttgart and Sindelfingen is not very far." It is exactly this reputation of handcrafted quality production, which these cars have, that makes them successful on world markets. What should be kept in mind, however, is that this secret of successful Wuerttemberg industrialization has been the result of a cultural-religious inheritance that stems from the Early Modern period – an era pre-dating industrialization proper. What you can also see from this is that processes of industrialization follow different paths, which are not necessarily unilinear, irreversible processes, but rather processes that can be molded by human specificities – by cultural specificities.

FOCUS In your book *Weben und Überleben,* you argue that the small, ordinary choices of the common people are of more historical significance on the whole than an abstract external force of history – such as the development of technology – to cause change in society. Does this create an "open-ended" view of history, or how does this focus challenge traditional assumptions about the shape and nature of historical development?

HM I think the idea of "open-ended history" really hits the central mark of my view of history. What I try to show in my work as a historian is that historical processes are never without their

alternatives. This pertains to wars or other seemingly large and overpowering processes such as industrialization or the making of the modern state or modernization. To call this alternative view a more open-ended view of history than that promulgated by centrist, unilinear interpretations is exactly the mark. Open-ended, too, in the way that I always try to not only look at elites but also at normal people and how historical processes are reflected and acted out in their everyday lives.

This open-ended view of history also entails a specific kind of historical practice that I try to advocate. In my work as a professional historian I have always tried to encourage others who are nonprofessionally interested in history to do their own research, apart from the academic "guild" of historians and apart from the universities. Of course, I am aware that this is a paradox that I, who worked in a Max- Planck-Institute for History, a truly academic citadel, incited and encouraged people to be what we in Germany call *Barfuß Historiker*. In doing so I stick to the motto that Swedish barefoot historians have coined: Dig where you stand – *Grabe, wo du stehst!* Thus, when I am in Cincinnati occupied with writing a book about the Thirty Years' War, I cannot help but to start digging here, too. I take a close look, for instance, at your fantastic historical monument of what once was a busy railway terminal: Union Railway Station. Without any exaggeration, I think this is one of the grandest railway station buildings in the world, and it is good that the citizens of Cincinnati have saved it. At present, outside the building there is only one platform where there formerly used to be eighteen, and two trains a week go from here to Chicago and this only in the middle of the night. I am truly shocked by this. I see and feel that this grandiose station building is a *Denkmal* of a lost modernity that could have developed otherwise in Cincinnati. I was very touched when inside the station building I saw some of the murals from the 1930s. They represent this modernity that has been lost in the meantime.

Two of the most interesting of these murals have been taken off the walls of the great hall and have been re-located to the underground i.e. the basement of the building. There, they mark the entrance to the library and archive of the Cincinnati Historical Society. This has been truly a significant act of memorial practice: When you arrive at the entrance to the library

and archive, you have these two murals before you, which for me encapsulate in striking ways the paradoxes which move me as a historian. On the left-hand side, you find a railway locomotive of the 1930s under full steam, moving forward into the future. It has flags waving at its side. A picture of a bygone future propagated by railroads. But the ingenious artist has put a second image by the side, which is really illuminating. It bears the inscription "Modern Limited" and shows the back of a train which looks somewhat decrepit. Two truly fascinating images. They have made a powerful impression on me while moving around Cincinnati. After all this is a town in which the many layers of modernity including its "back yards" and other sides too, its "bygone futures" so to speak – to take up a term introduced by the great German historian Reinhart Koselleck – can be seen and visualized while walking down the streets.

So, you can see I cannot leave this activity of *Grabe, wo du stehst* alone in Cincinnati and what I discover are fascinating topics. Few people have worked on them. One example concerns a journal entitled *Cincinnati Republikaner. Organ der Arbeiter*, which was edited in the middle of the nineteenth century by a combatant and then adversary of Karl Marx, August Willich, who came to Cincinnati after the failed revolution of 1848. He took up a typical career as journalist, became an active soldier in the Civil War and entered a second career which he ended as General.

Like Willich, many other interesting immigrants from Germany and Austria lived here after 1848. One of the most fascinating and successful amongst them was the Austrian Friedrich Hassaurek, who came to Cincinnati as a political refugee from Vienna at the age of seventeen and lived and worked here as a successful journalist, writer and entrepreneur.

This was a generation of highly motivated democrats, liberals and socialists who had fought for a democratic revolution in Central Europe in 1848. When this revolution was suppressed, the people involved came to the US, many of them to Cincinnati. With their civic and political engagement here, especially on the Northern side in the Civil War, they realized on American soil what they were prevented from accomplishing in Europe.

It could be fascinating for a German or American historian to edit a diary or autobiography of one of these German immigrants, who contributed so much to the political culture and also economic upswing in Cincinnati and the US in the second half of the nineteenth century, during an age which experienced and grasped the multiple possibilities of a transition to modernity.

FOCUS You have talked about creating a history textbook on the Thirty Years' War for American undergraduate students. How do you make history relevant or interesting to American undergraduates who know little or nothing about the Thirty Years' War or about European history?

HM I think it is interesting and important to know about the Thirty Years' War as an American student of European history, especially because it was the most devastating war that Central Europe or any other of the regions of Europe had ever lived through. About half of the population of Germany was wiped out. What makes this war still interesting today is what Friedrich Schiller has called its persistent "shadow image" (*Schattenbild*) over the centuries. The Thirty Years' War in the collective memory of Central Europeans and in the works written by historians represents the extreme possible case of a war catastrophe. It is this continuing shadow image of the Thirty Years' War, that makes it necessary for a historian to disentangle it, by pointing out not only the many strategies of survival that were practiced in this war, but also the methods of torturing, killing and conducting the business of war used by military entrepreneurs, like Wallenstein, or many others who literally made this war.

If we talk of war lords in present day Afghanistan, it is illuminating to critically reflect on their similarities to war lords of the Thirty Years' War. Which ways of waging war have changed since the seventeenth century and which have not? States no longer move around the world as all-powerful, all-determining actors. But new kinds of violent entrepreneurship have come underway on the side of war-making states, but also on the side of those like the Taliban that work with and through war lords. This all makes the Thirty Years' War entirely relevant for comparisons from the present.

FOCUS You mentioned the importance of religion in people's everyday lives, as evidenced in your studies on Laichingen and in your research on the Thirty Years' War. You also mentioned that in modern warfare, the conflict is not limited to political states but extends to groups of people, independent from the state, which are religiously motivated. Is religion still as important of a factor today as it was in the Early Modern period and, if it is, how specifically do we integrate religion as part of the interdisciplinary process of doing research as academics?

HM That is indeed both a backward and forward-looking question. I will try to give you some partial answers. I think we no longer live in an age of secularization. Habermas and others have said that we live in a post-secular age, in which religion is coming back. You can see it if you watch processes underway around the globe, but it is not the same religion, the same practices and beliefs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. You really have to investigate anew the influence of religion in global processes, but also in people's everyday lives. In doing this, you not only have to look at religious services and declared beliefs but you also have to look into the religious underground in everyday practices. In doing so, you can see how the issue of religion really is important, and if I see for instance certain American missionary attitudes, as they pertain to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I also find that there is a religious background to this – a secularized religious background, however, which seems somewhat strange to European Lutherans. To be aware in this way of the many layers in which religion affects our lives and our politics, I think, is a highly relevant and critical contemporary endeavor. This makes it necessary, however, to read many texts "against the grain" as Walter Benjamin has said, against their officially proclaimed meanings, and then you can discover a *Tiefenstruktur* that opens up the religious dimension of texts, of human practices and human lives.

FOCUS Thank you very much!

This interview was conducted by Wesley Jackson in April 2010 at the University of Cincinnati.