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An Interview with Professor Stefan Berger



Stefan Berger
(foto: Ruhr-Universitaet Bochum)

About Professor Stefan Berger:

Stefan Berger was born in 1964 in Langenfeld, Germany. He studied History, German literature and Political sciences at the University of Cologne. He graduated with a PhD from Trinity College in Oxford in 1991 with a thesis titled *The Labour Party and the SPD. A Comparison of their Structure and Development and a Discussion of the Relations Between the Two Movements, 1900–1933*. Afterwards he worked at the Universities of Plymouth, Cardiff, Glamorgan and Manchester. From 2011 onwards he works as a social history professor at the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. He is also Chairman of the Foundation History of the Ruhr and Director of the Institute for Social Movements. His professional interests

include nationalism and national identity studies, the history of modern historiography, social history and the history of industrial heritage. He was Principal Investigator in the programme titled *Representations of the Past: The Writings of National Histories in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. He is the author of several national identity studies, such as *Inventing the Nation: Germany, The Search for Normality. National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany Since 1800*, *History and Identity: How Historical Theory Shapes Historical Practice*, *The Past as History. National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe*. An additional testimony to Berger's expertise as historian are the forty-eight publications he was editor of, which touched upon various topics of nationalism, social history, theoretical approaches to historiography, the history of labour movements, as well as relations between England and Germany throughout the modern period. It is also important to note that recently a collection of his essays has been published by Srednja Europa in Croatian translation by Michael Antolović. The book, in Croatian titled *Historiografija, nacionalizam i identitet*, helped bring Berger's studies closer to Croatian academic circles.

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us today. I would like to begin by asking you how it is you came to be interested in studying the relationship between nationalism and historiography. Would you say that you being born and studying in Germany had anything to do with the formation of these academic interests of yours?

Yes, absolutely. I got interested in the relationship between nationalism and historiography in the context of German reunification in 1990, so I think without this happening I probably would not have found that topic. What I noted in the post-1990 period was a shift in the way in which German national history was narrated in the reunified Germany, and I got so interested in this shift that I decided to study it more in depth after finishing my PhD. And my second book, which is about that shift, which is called *The Search for Normality* – therefore was very much about the shifting national historiographical discourse in Germany after 1990. Although there is a long chapter on the prehistory of German national historical writing from the late 18th century to 1990, the bulk of the analysis of the book is on the shifting discourse after 1990. So from that German scenario I then, after I finished that book, decided to look at how this relationship between history writing and national identity formation was looking for other states in Europe and, together with my then colleagues Kevin Passmore and Mark Donovan, we organised a conference on this and subsequently edited a book entitled *Writing National Histories*. It analyses the relationship between national history writing and identity formation in Western Europe, which is largely Britain, France, Italy and Germany from 1800 to the present, and from that I then developed together with others, in particular Guy Marchal and Christoph Conrad, a big European Science Foundation programme on this topic, which ran for several years in the 2000s and produced quite a string of books on this topic, but the original interest very much came from the German scenario.

I wanted to go back to your first published book, which was based on your doctoral dissertation, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats 1900 – 1931: A Comparison*. That book represents one of the few comparative and transnational studies of labour movements at the time. What would you say was the inspiration for such an unconventional approach at the time?

I would say that the initial idea behind the topic also very much came from personal experience, because I grew up in a German working-class family with a long tradition of being Social Democrats. So, in that sense, I had been socialised into the world of social democracy and when it was time to decide what topic my PhD should have it was kind of natural for me to connect this family interest with a scholarly interest in the history of social democracy, and because I grew up in Germany but was doing my PhD at the University of Oxford in Britain, I thought it would be a good idea to write a transnational and comparative study on the British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats. As you said, there wasn't much comparative labour history, but there was some and in that literature from Walter Kendall to Hans Mommsen, there was always the idea that the British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats were at opposing ends of a spectrum of labour movements that you could find in history. But when I looked into this, my own impression was quite different, so that the basic idea behind the book was to somehow correct what I still believe to be a wrong dichotomy between those two parties. I would very much argue that they had more in common than is or was usually assumed in the comparative history of labour parties. So, in that sense, the idea was to engage with comparative historiography literature. In the mid-1980s, when I was beginning this research, this was a time when Labour history was very much seen as being in crisis. The heydays of labour history had been the 1960s and the 1970s, where it was often associated with contemporary social and political change promoted by 1968ers, the radical student movement and neo-Marxists. Labour history was popular, as it seemed to be teaching lessons for the present. And in the 1980s, when this came to an end and there was more of a conservative turn in politics again in a variety of different countries, this notion was fading. Furthermore, the very detailed analysis focusing, in particular, on the organisational history of labour movements was seen as being rather narrow and unable to connect to wider questions in the historical field so that it became a bit of a niche interest for historians. There were various attempts to move labour history out of this very defensive position in the 1980s, and one of these was to move labour history more in the direction of comparative history. Hence, the 1980s were a decade in which comparative history was to some extent having a new renaissance, not only in labour history, but in other fields as well. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt has worked on this and has shown how the 1980s were the first decade when comparative history was more widely practised. Calls for comparative history were quite old. One of the most famous ones came from Marc Bloch at the 1926 World History Congress, which he subsequently published as a paper in the *Revue de Synthèse historique* in 1928, and that was often quoted as a kind of appeal for

more comparative history in which he depicted comparative history as a particularly promising methodological way of writing history. But comparative history was rarely practiced until the 1980s.

This comparative and transnational approach is something you apply in your studies of nationalism as well, which is evident in your work on national museums and national heritage especially, but also in the project Representations of the Past: The Writings of National Histories in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Can you identify some of the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach when it comes to studying the nation and its mechanisms of nation building?

With comparative history, there are many advantages, but also a lot of potential pitfalls. You have to be aware of the difficulties of doing comparative history, because there is a limit to what individuals can do in terms of their familiarity with different contexts, which is why a more detailed comparison between fewer cases is often more beneficial than large scale comparisons between many cases. Now, of course it does help if you write comparative studies on the back of large research consortia which have been looking at a particular topic over a sustained period of time and the book I wrote on national history writing in Europe is very much the result of many years of not only individual study of different European countries but many years of engaging with many scholars from different countries who have analysed different aspects of that relationship for a variety of different countries. So, in that sense, comparative history needs a kind of broader research network that you can draw on in order to help you bridge the gaps that you invariably will have when it comes to this familiarity with different contexts – different national or different regional contexts. Another difficulty with comparative history has been highlighted by Michael Werner and Michele Espagne, who have, in the Franco-German context, developed this idea of an entangled history or *histoire croisée* – a kind of notion that in fact the cases that you compare are already interconnected so it doesn't make sense like in a classic comparison to have case A and case B, and treat those cases as though they had nothing in common or no relations between them. In fact, you need to look at the interrelationship between those cases before you can compare them because you need to take into account those interrelationships. Interestingly, even before I read Werner and Espagne, they published, I think, their first important work on this in French in 1988, I was doing something similar in my PhD on the Labour Party and the SPD, because again, I looked at the relationship between those parties and compared those parties against the backdrop of those relationships. So, for me, what Werner and Espagne, and others, Bénédicte Zimmermann for example, have written subsequently was very much common sense. But it adds another layer of complexity and of difficulty. On the other hand, the advantages of doing comparative history are obvious: if you manage to compare meaningfully around a series of research questions that you have to carefully define in the setup of your research, then you will find differences and similarities which allow you to relativize or put into perspective explanations that may seem logical

if you just analyse one case. In that sense, I think comparison is a very good method to see whether particular explanations in history that are applied to one specific case do hold water when compared with other cases. I always use the example of the rise of fascism in Germany, where the victory of National Socialism has often been attributed by many historians to the severity of the Great Depression after 1929 – the huge unemployment, collapse of enterprises and banks, the economic and social turmoil that accompanied it. And that makes a lot of sense if you just look at Germany because there does seem to be some connection between the two. But then if you compare the effects of the Great Depression on other countries, I would use the example that I know best again – Britain. In Britain, it was every bit as severe as it was in Germany, but fascism remained a minority movement in Britain and never threatened to gain power. So, the economic explanation alone cannot be sufficient in order to explain the rise of fascism, there must have been other factors in the case of Germany to explain the rise of Hitler. In that sense, I think comparison does provide a good methodological tool for testing explanation in history. That is perhaps the most significant advantage of comparison. And of course, if we look at the rise of historiography, certainly in 19th-century Europe, but also more globally in the 20th century, we see that the strength of the relationship between nation state formation and historical writing meant that historical writing on nation state formation was very intent on arguing that there was something very specific, almost unique, about that nation building formation in one country, so you have this proliferation of the national special path or national peculiarities in national history writing. But if you then compare, you suddenly find that it doesn't look all that much different in different nation states. It also relativizes this tendency to portray one's own nation as something very peculiar or very special in history. In that sense, comparison, apart from the fact that it obviously widens your horizon, really does allow for a more systematic view of particular topics and themes, whether it is labour history or the history of historiography, or the topic that I've been working on for a number of years now: deindustrialization and the memory of an industrial past. So, in that sense, I think there are indeed many advantages, but it remains a difficult exercise.

Touching upon the topic of industrialization, in your article Historians, Nationalism Studies and the Economy, you talk about the often-neglected historical research of how economy affected national identity. Given that more attention to that phenomenon has been given in sociology and economics, there arises a specific need for interdisciplinarity, something that still many historians lack in their approach. Why do you think this economic nationalism is so neglected? And how can we incorporate economy in our studies of nationalism to gain a more rounded overview of how it affects nation and nation building?

I think it's interesting that there is that neglect in the study of nationalism, but economic history has also often paid insufficient attention to questions of nation building. This was not always the case. In Germany, for example, a so-ca-

lled historical school of national economics developed strongly in the 19th and early 20th century. They were economists who were very much trying to look at economic developments in national terms. After 1945, however, partly because of nationalism being discredited by two world wars, this tradition became a forgotten one. By the 1980s, when nationalism studies became more popular again, with many important books appearing on nationalism in the early 1980s – Benedict Anderson, John Breuilly, Ernest Gellner, economic aspects did not play a central role in comparison to ideology, politics and culture. In the 1990s economics and economic history became much more interested in globalization and the global interconnectivity of the economy rather than the interplay between economy and nationalism. Hence nationalism studies and economic history were on diverging paths. In the book that I co-edited with Thomas Fetzner we tried to highlight the strong relationship between the economy and nationalism, which should be studied more. Since we published the book there have been signs that scholars are picking this up. There are now more studies which are looking at the impact of the economy on nationalism, and also at the impact of nationalism on the economy, so it is an evolving theme in historical writing, which is a good thing.

Furthermore, you talk of the idea of historians sometimes being so-called fathers of the nation. Having that in mind, what would you say was the role of historians and history in general in those, let us say, early days of nation building in the 19th century, but also moving on to the 20th century and nowadays? How were they involved in the formation of nations' narratives of identity?

Well, my argument has always been that historians have been extremely influential as nation builders, and they have not only been able to position themselves as almost the only ones who could speak on national history with authority. They used their 'scientificity' to promote themselves as the key experts on national history. National history being such a central ingredient to national identity meant that those who were in power or those who were looking to get into power would make use of historians as key experts in formulating a particular vision of a nation that aligned with the interests of those groups of people. In that sense, I think they were very successful in the 19th century as they rose as a profession to become arguably the lead profession – every science in the 19th century wanted to be historical. When it came to questions of the nation, there was a close relationship between politics and historical writing. The greatest influence that many of the historians had was not so much as the authors of multi-volume books on national history that they also wrote. That was part of their profession. That was also their claim to authority. But then, of course, they also wrote speeches for politicians, for example, on 'national days' or for national festivities. They wrote for the newspapers. They were very much in the public sphere. They often became politicians themselves. In that sense, it was more the public facing side of historians which had that influence in the 19th and 20th centuries over attempts to define who the nation was and what it should look like. This is also true for the most recent past. I've looked at

some detail at the German case – specifically at Heinrich August Winkler, who is one of the well-known contemporary modern historians of Germany. He wrote a classical national history in two volumes after reunification entitled *The Long Way West*, which has become the kind of new national master narrative of the reunified Germany. It was translated with the help of money from the German Foreign Office into all sorts of languages and it is very much promoted by mainstream politics in West Germany as the new national narrative that overcomes the kind of post-nationalism that is very much identified with the late history of the old Federal Republic. Winkler attempts to use history to legitimate a democratic nation with a cosmopolitan western outlook.

Although historians have had such a great impact in the 19th century, they still have key influence in the formation of so many myths regarding the nation today. Given that the topic of this year's issue of our journal are Myths and Narratives, what would you say are the key myths for the formation of one nation's identity, and, furthermore, how do historians help create and promote such nation building myths? How do myths and historians that help create them make the distinction between nation and otherness, or other nations – a key process in the formation of one's identity?

The literature on myths is, of course, huge and there is much to be said on myths and their role in national identity formation. Perhaps I can start with the myth of longevity – the fact that all nations try to trace back their national histories to the dawn of time when it sort of gets lost in the fog of prehistory. So, it was very important to say that the nation has been there for a very long time. It was something that accompanied human beings almost from the beginning. In fact, I remember visiting the National History Museum of Finland in the late 2000s and I've just visited last month the history exhibition in Lima in Peru about national history and both these exhibitions claimed that the first Finns or the first Peruvians appeared after the end of the Ice Age. This is the most immediate claim that the emergence of humans is linked to the emergence of nations. Such naturalising of the nation in the depths of time is one of the key myths surrounding national identity formation. And another is the notion that the nation has been suffering under the yoke of foreign oppression. That's another characteristic myth of many national histories that the nation is defined against another that has been oppressing that nation often for centuries. That is already also pointing to your question about otherness, how, in a way, many of these myths construct the nation *vis a vis* some kind of Other – another nation, an empire, whatever it might be – that was trying to hold back the nation. Then there are many myths surrounding alleged cultural essences: particular traditions, cultures, habits that are narrated as being so ingrained in the national being that they become naturalised and become a kind of hallmark of the nation. So, in that sense, I think the essentialization of culture, and subsequently, from the last third of the 19th century onwards, also the essentialization of ethnicity into race, becomes another of those mythologies surrounding national identity. There's a whole range of things that

could be mentioned here, but I think the construction of those myths were incredibly important in establishing the frames in which national history could be narrated so the historians in a way ironically became one of the key myth makers, despite the fact that their profession would always claim that they as historians were myth destroyers because they were establishing the scientific truth against those kind of myths. But their myths were scientific myths, if you like – they were different variants of myths.

Almost 10 years ago, our student journal published the translation of one of your chapters, and recently a collection of your essays has been published as a book in Croatian translation by Michael Antolovich. Such translations make a great contribution to understanding the need for self-reflection and studying, as well as thinking about the nation and understanding what lies behind nationalism. Bearing that in mind, and the fact that Croatia, as well as Germany, has a somewhat problematic past, do you think it is even possible to create a useful past out of such a troubled one without falling in the trap of creating myths about it? Furthermore, is creating useful narratives about the past something we as historians and citizens should even strive for?

I always find that I cannot really think of or conceive of a history that I would find interesting that doesn't have this aspect of a useful past. In the sense that I would find it pointless to write history that was, in Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase, antiquarian history, rooted in the past without any connection to the present and therefore to the future. So, in that sense, I would say that my own understanding of history is very much rooted in a search for a past that has a meaning in the present and allows us in the present to construct a future. This notion of the political relevance of history is a very old one that goes back to the 19th century. And it is also a very problematic one in that it has created particular visions of a useful past that were promoting not only nationalism, but also war, ethnic cleansing and genocide – lots of problematic political projects. It reminds us that, in a way, when we enter that realm of a useful past, we enter a contested terrain and that it is part of that construction of a useful past to enter that contested terrain and participate in that contestation over which past do we want to choose in order to legitimate which present and forge which future. This is a question for all societies regardless of how problematic or unproblematic their past may be. In some respects, the construction of an unproblematic past is, of course, also always a construction. Britain is a good example, because I do remember that in my own student days many of my British fellow students would always say: "Ohh British history is so boring, ... nothing was happening. It was all just about parliaments and politics. German history, with all its violent ruptures, is much more fascinating." But then, if you look at the history of British colonialism and colonial violence, you have no end of evil people, no end of crimes in history. So, in that sense, I think that every nation has a problematic past. Only sometimes it is more openly constructed as such. National pasts and their problematic sides are always contested. If we take Germany as an example again, currently we have in Germany

a fairly strong revisionism of history around the rise of a right-wing populist party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). In terms of its history politics, it is very much arguing that Germans should not anchor their identity in the history of National Socialism and the history of the Holocaust. That they should develop a more positive attitude towards their national history on the basis of centuries of glorious German national history. And that is in a way part of that contestation about the national past that has been going on in Germany for a very long time and that is going on in most societies across the globe. In that sense, I would say that it is worthwhile looking at history in the sense of a foundation on which to construct a political project. But I think history also has a very important role to play in criticising attempts to use history in this way. So, it is both the search for a usable past and the critique of the search for a usable past which have to be fields in which historical analysis takes place. It's somewhat contradictory, but I think the productive synergies between this search for a critique of a usable past and the search for a usable past is something that makes the whole exercise in studying the past interesting.

How can we as historians overcome such purely nationalist perspectives? In other words, what would be the cure for the curse of what can sometimes even be unconscious methodological nationalism?

One possible cure for methodological nationalism is comparative and transnational history. It relativizes the alleged logic of the national frame. Of course, the framework of the nation state has at times and in certain areas been incredibly important. So, I don't think we should throw the baby out with the bathwater and say that nations and nation states are completely unimportant. If we look at a topic such as the history of the welfare state, it is very clear that the history of the welfare state is a history that takes place in the 20th century largely within the framework of nation states. We can still compare how it develops in different national frameworks, but the framework is one of the nation state and it should not be underestimated. But that's different from adopting nationalist perspectives on such nation state frames. In some respects, I think it is the attempt to look at other nations than your own, which helps in overcoming nationalist perspectives and helps to overcome methodological nationalism and I think also to perhaps follow research questions that are not necessarily rooted in a particular concern for the nation, but research questions that are applicable to a variety of different nation state situations, which also helps to overcome these kind of nationalist perspectives on historical writing.

You have published a lot of articles, chapters and books on these topics, but I would like to ask you, is there something you are currently working on – a project, a book or something else?

The most recent topic that I really got into is this question of the history of deindustrialization and the way in which various actors in those histories of deindustrialization have been using memory to forge a particular vision of the future of those places undergoing deindustrialization processes. My next book

project is one in which I will try and compare regions of heavy industry and their deindustrialization and how memory was used as a resource by different actors – state actors, industrialists, trade unionists, social movements, civil society actors – to argue in the present for particular futures of those regions or cities. And again, pretty much like with the historiographical nationalism project I've been doing this on the back of big consortia of researchers looking at deindustrialization in different parts of the world. Over the last years, I had the privilege of being a visiting professor to various regions of the world studying the industrialization of those places. I intend this to be a global history looking not only at the global north, but also at the global south because deindustrialization has been taking place also in the global south and memory has always been an integral process of strategies which deal with deindustrialization.

What would be your advice for young researchers trying to make sense of the world in which nationalist narratives are still quite present in the public, although Hobsbawm has made claims that that would not be true for much longer?

Hobsbawm was quite optimistic in that book from 1989 in arguing that historians had turned from legitimising nationalism to criticising nationalism. And I would say in that respect, he was not entirely wrong. Although we do have in many nations around the globe historians who still legitimate nationalism, I would say that the overwhelming majority of professional historians today are probably critical of nationalism. But it leaves space for largely non-professional historians, publicists, literary figures, and pseudo-historians to fill that space and to promote nationalism in the name of history. Therefore, young researchers have to be aware of those public nationalisms that are still all around us. In fact, they are getting stronger with the rise of right-wing populist movements across the world. This makes it all the more important to criticise this nationalist spirit that still is very prominent in the world and to engage publicly with it. Young researchers need to take their public role as intellectuals seriously and not withdraw to the ivory tower of the academy. It is one thing to research historiographical nationalism, and it is another to work against it in the political sphere. Both are necessary components of a successful strategy against nationalism. And, of course, historiographical nationalism can best be countered by paying attention to entangled history, global history, and transnational history in order to show that many of the claims that are made by nationalist historians and nationalist narratives in historical writing cannot be maintained if we look at a particular problem in comparative and transnational ways.

Thank you very much for your contribution and your insights!

Pro Tempore

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