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WIE BESTIMMT DIE DISTANZ ZUM UNTERSUCHUNGSGEGENSTAND DEN FORSCHUNGSPROZESS?

Teil 6

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Wie findet und formuliert man eine gute historische Frage?

Teil 6

Lyndal Roper, 13. April 2023

*Dieser Text ist eine Verschriftlichung des Eingangsstatement von Lyndal Roper bei der Diskussionsreihe "Geschichtliche Grundfragen". Die von Rüdiger Graf (ZZF), Matthias Pohlig (HUB) und Ulrike Schaper (FU Berlin) initiierte Veranstaltung fand im Winter- und Sommersemester 2021/22 im online-Format statt. **Zeitgeschichte** |online veröffentlicht die Eingangsstatements der Veranstaltung in einem Dossier. Die Vorträge wurden bis auf wenige Ausnahmen von der Audioaufnahme transkribiert und überarbeitet, dabei wurde Wert darauf gelegt, die rein sprachliche Form der Statements beizubehalten.*

Geschichtliche Grundfragen

Teil VI

Wie bestimmt die Distanz zum Untersuchungsgegenstand den Forschungsprozess?

Diskussion am 06. Februar 2023 (online)

Eingangsstatement von Lyndal Roper (Oxford, UK)

The title of our discussion reminds me of an article by Mark Salber Philips which we used to use in teaching, and as I began to prepare for this evening I realised that I no longer remembered what his argument had been – only that he had recounted how one student had asked whether the popularity of microhistory wasn't simply because 'your generation came too late to get the really important stuff – the lives of people like Cosimo de Medici or Lorenzo the magnificent – so really there was not much left over for you to write about except this bunch of oddballs and small potatoes?' What was the point of microhistory and its reconstruction close-up of people in the past? I was deep into reconstructing the life history of one particular witch at the time and I remember how his words dug into my soul. What was the point indeed? I decided that it was time to do something different, and I stopped working on criminal interrogations. Well, at least for a while.

'Distance and closeness' is an issue for those who want to work on what I would call 'subjectivity'. By this I mean the felt experience of individuals in the past. The obvious solution to the problem of distance and closeness is to warn historians that they must keep distance from their subjects, make no assumptions, and analyse people from the past as if they came from the moon, from a completely unfamiliar culture which it is the historian's job to reconstruct without preconceptions.

This way of thinking about subjectivity comes from a particular view of anthropology, which at that time was guiding historians of 'history from below'. But it also presupposed a huge distance between 'us' and 'them', which we now might see as having something in common with an imperialist mindset. When this discussion was first going on, my inclination was not to emphasize distance but rather to see commonalities with people in the past, because I was interested in using insights from psychoanalysis to help me understand my source material. Although I would never have admitted this in print, I think that I also believed – and still do – that one way we learn as historians is by thinking about our own experience, physical, emotional and relational. This is one reason why the growing numbers of women among professional historians has also changed the subjects we study, including subjects like the history of emotion, the body, or motherhood.

I've just finished writing a book about the German Peasants' War, which has raised the question of distance and closeness in new ways. I have a triangle of theologians – Luther, Müntzer and Karlstadt – and I can follow their twisted relationships through the war and recreate their drama; I have letters, treatises, writings about them, lots of words. But I don't want to write a history that centres around the theologians, fascinating though their story is. I want to tell the story of the peasants. There are criminal interrogations of peasants, yes, but not for most of the people I want to know more about. The trials that exist are brief and fragmentary – they don't allow the combustion of psyches that happen in the witch craze. The 'confessions' are far more strategic, driven by the authorities' need to punish leaders but not to execute too many of their workforce; and I know that the records we have were carefully purged at the time. But I also know that an event like a mass revolt involves an emotional transformation on the part of many people, who reach a point where they are willing to take action even though that risks their property and even their lives. I wanted to convey what it felt like to engage in revolt. What does it mean to walk for hundreds of kilometers to join a peasant army? To touch a chalice, the container of the wine of the

Eucharist, which you had only ever seen in the distance; and to take it home with you? Or to sing Come Holy Ghost with thousands of others before the battle of Frankenhausen? The experience of covid taught me how important it is to gather in close physical proximity, and how emotions can be magnified in groups. I was sure this had to be part of the story, group subjectivity. But I also knew that I didn't have the tools to think about this very well; psychoanalytic writing is better at thinking about individuals than about groups.

So I want to outline three ways in which I tried to approach this problem. I'm sorry it's so humdrum and practical! But it's motivated by the idea that:

Words are not the whole story. What people mean is not just conveyed in their words but in what they do and in their relationships. So analysing their language alone is not enough.

1. Here I've learnt a lot from historians of slavery. Recently, black feminist historians have begun to uncover the lives of slaves, especially women slaves, in ways many thought impossible. But the work of Brenda Stevenson and others has shown how reconstructing all the details of a slave's life – where they were captured, from what port they sailed, with whom, how near or far away others had lived, who were likely friends or acquaintances, where they arrived, and so on – can give us a powerful sense of an individual's life and relationships, so that they become agents and not just people to whom something was done. In the case of the peasants, historians like Thomas Müller can reconstruct their itineraries, which peasant groups they went to, and how long they spent marching; what they consumed, what they smashed, what they stole. Sometimes this may be all we know. Here we need to use the technique of imaginative reconstruction, and you will say that this is not a respectable methodology. But we need it if we are to avoid writing a history of what was done TO the peasants.

By imaginative reconstruction I mean imaginatively reconstructing all the details of daily life that we can and trying to work out how they might have been subjectively experienced by thinking about their likely effects. I am not sure that this is what Salber Phillips means by a 'dialogue' with the past. But yes, it does rely on assuming a continuity and limited similarity with people's emotions and bodies 500 years ago in the connections I make between a physical fact – for instance, marching long distances – and its likely effects.

2. Contemporaries who experienced the Peasants War and who were trying to come to terms with it afterwards were in no doubt about the importance of emotion – they describe town Councillors with tears in their eyes, people who were angry. The radical theologian Karlstadt writes about feeling fear when he was confronted with a peasant army who did not want to hear what he had to say. Another chronicler writes about how the peasants' emotions as if they were a cycle; they had 'tasted the sweetness of poisonous leisure and freedom' and because they had not meet any reverses, but just captured all the monasteries and castles in their way, their 'hitzig und girig gamut dardurch nit gestilt' but became more and more ufgeblasen' and they were convinced that it would all end well and they would win 'on sorg und arbeit' [*aber der gemain hauf hette ytzund die sussickait des giftigen musiggehns und freyhait erschmackt mainte, dieweil es bishere an seinem furnemen kain verhinderung empfunden, sonder ine nach seinem gefallen zugestanden, es wurt also hinaus gehn und iederman on sorg und arbeit gnug bekommen, darumb ir hitzig und girig gemut dardurch nit gestilt, sonder ie lenger ie mehr ufgeblasen ...*]This is a hostile account, but what is interesting is how important he considers their emotion of heat, excitement of tasting freedom and longing for it; the intoxication of being able to take all those castles. I don't think the Bauernkrieg is just about emotion, but I think we can't understand the ideas of the peasants' war unless we think about how people felt and lived it, and above all, what freedom felt like, or rather, what it tasted like. And it was also taste, as they ate their fill of meat and camped outdoors.
3. Mostly we don't know about our subjects' dreams but the significance of dreams and visions was one of the big fault lines of the Reformation, with Luther rejecting them and insisting only Scripture was the authority, while theologians like Thomas Müntzer maintained that dreams were important and that we must be open to the Word of God communicating with the believer now. Müntzer paid attention to the dreams of his parishioners and had them transcribed by his secretary; hostile sources claim that he used them as material to preach from daily.

In writing about Luther I found I had quite a number of dreams and they too are important ways of thinking about our subjects. What we dream is cultural as well as disclosing the unconscious and so dreams are interestingly challenging sources to use

because they work at so many levels. So in one case, a dream disclosed aspects of Luther's relations with his confessor Staupitz as he headed off away from the old church and broke with the other man. Describing the dream, in which Staupitz appeared to him and then departed, he said he felt 'like a child weaned from its mother.' (Psalm 131) I couldn't have got at this any other way, in part because Luther would not have articulated the depths of his feeling for this man or the costs of the Reformation. But I also found that the reformers at Wittenberg told each other their dreams and interpreted them, collectively. The various interpretations allowed them to articulate anxieties about, for instance, Melancthon's leadership at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 (Luther could not be there) that they couldn't otherwise discuss.

So was Salber Phillips's critique of the pursuit of subjectivity in the past right? Were we just exploring the inner worlds of people no-one cares about? I would like to think not. I think that the inner conflicts and emotional attachments of a man like Luther matter hugely in understanding his theology. And I think that we cannot understand the nature of a cataclysmic event like a revolution without understanding the power of collective emotion. Part of what made the theology of a man like Thomas Müntzer so profoundly transformative was his ability to recruit the power of dreams, of the unconscious, as his followers dreamt of blood, mills, and water. These were eucharistic and baptismal symbols as well as sexual symbols, and they brought cosmic issues right into the everyday. To understand what the peasants meant by freedom, we need to reconstruct their world, psychic, material and social.

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