**WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN AND WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN IT MAKE?**

**A CONVERSATION WITH GEOFF ELEY**

Geoff Eley studied History at Balliol College, Oxford, before gaining his PhD at the University of Sussex in 1974. Since 1979 he has taught at the University of Michigan, where he now serves as the Karl Pohrt Distinguished University Professor of Contemporary History. Professor Eley has written extensively on German history in books including *The Peculiarities of German History* (1984) co-authored with David Blackbourn and *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (1986). Lately, his interests have ranged from examinations of the European Left, in *Forging Democracy: The History of Left in Europe 1850 – 2000* (2002) to the critical historiographical reflections of his memoir, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (2005) and *The Future of Class in History* (2005), co-authored with Keith Nield. He spoke to MHJ at the 23rd meeting of the Australasian Association for European History (AAEH) in Wellington, New Zealand.

**Interview by Chloe Ward**

MHJ: Can you reflect, generally, on the state of European history and what sorts of questions European historians are currently asking?

GE: The big buzz for some time has been about transnationalism. There are various ways of understanding it. Much of the impetus comes purposefully from the EU, and that has certain practical entailments. The infrastructure of funding for research for historians and for access to research has become extremely large scale and collaborative, for example, in the sense that you increasingly need not only a team of faculty and graduate students in the particular institution, but also the capacity for cross-national cooperation. Invariably the most successful projects – as far as access to funding and infrastructure goes, but also to keep graduate students alive with contracts and post-docs – are large-scale multinational collaboratives in the context of EU supported research. Much of the action can run through particular institutions, like the European University Institute in Florence and so on. The implicit intellectual agenda is being driven in large part by European integration, so that the impressive ma-
chinery of ‘transnational’ discussion housed inside the EU presupposes a kind of ‘European outlook’ and a Europeanist set of analytics. It’s on this that the prioritising of transnational history and the idea of the transnational subsists. You can make that argument successfully without being crude or reductive.

All of that impetus translates into really interesting projects, but it can be unclear where ‘transnationalism’ differs from ‘comparative’ and ‘global’ – these are often interchangeable in the rhetorics – or from the related enthusiasms for ‘entangled histories.’ In project titles and calls for proposals, in relationship to the kinds of language required to secure the desired funding, this all becomes a bit formulaic, I find.

So anyway, there is a new interest in the global, in trying to construct one’s questions transnationally rather than inside the nation-state, so that the appropriate and illuminating contexts for approaching those questions can be rethought. Problems that we’ve tended to assume should be dealt with inside national frames – or via sub-national regional and local studies situated within a national context – need no longer observe those boundaries or obey those conventional rules. That’s one significant trend of the present.

**MHJ:** What might be the implication be for that in terms of historical perspective, for instance between very close, localised studies, broader national or regional perspectives [as, for instance, in Peter Monteath’s presentation, ‘One Day in Izraylovka’]?¹

**GE:** It depends hugely on what type of questions you’re asking. To go with the example you’ve mentioned – Peter Monteath’s work and the historiography and scholarship on the Holocaust – that’s a very good illustration of the difference a transnational perspective can make. Each of the big recent interventions – for example, Saul Friedländer’s magnum opus on *Nazi Germany and the Jews* or Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands* – have moved in this direction. Friedländer’s idea of an ‘integrated history’ means not only integrating voices of the victims, but also trying to write this history on a genuinely European scale which *ipso facto* becomes transnational in its perspectives and approach. Whether it’s Friedländer

¹ Peter Monteath, ‘One Day in Izraylovka’, paper presented at 23rd meeting of the Australasian Association for European History (AAEH), Wellington, 3 July 2013.
and his notion of an integrated history or Snyder’s cartography of genocide, or for that matter an entire recent historiography that takes the mass killing of the 1940s down to its eastern European ground, these are all attempts to locate the project away from either the centralised administrative perspective that emanates from Berlin, or from the more conventionally conceived regional or local studies. So that’s one very good instance of the difference that taking a transnational view can make.

Not feeling constrained by the conventional boundaries on one’s training and knowledge and prospective audience is incredibly liberating in terms of the kinds of projects it’s possible to come up with. Another dimension of this question – ‘the global, the transnational, what does it all mean exactly and what difference can it make?’ – is obviously the interest in colonialism and empire, which has been concurrent with the discourse of the transnational and the global. Each of these languages converged and it would be interesting to track their prevalence field by field. ‘Empire’ became in the course of the last fifteen years or so another ‘master concept’ in all sorts of ways, even epistemologically for many of the people who decided to situate their thinking inside it, so that the history of the world could be rewritten in terms of the history of empire, sometimes quite misguided. In one essay my friend and former colleague Fred Cooper suggests that the history of France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries since the French Revolution can be rewritten entirely inside the conceptual frame that empire provides, implying that the nation-state and national sovereignty can be set aside. Sometimes this shift in perspective seems heuristically intended, but at others ‘empire’ acquires superordinate, trans-historical importance for conceptualizing the development of state forms in the history of the world overall, against which other types of territorial polity (like the nation-state) can now be considered transitory and less significant. I’m thinking here of Jane Burbank and Fred Cooper’s Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference (2011). Seeing the importance of the imperial dimension shouldn’t displace other forms of sovereignty from view, but at this level of general history the ability to hold those differing perspectives together simultaneously seems to be quite hard. Once more carefully historicized, though, concepts of empire and imperial rule can be deployed to decisive effect. Spreading from British history to French history, and thence to German and now Italian, there has been a really important and successful attempt to reconceive national histories in terms of the colonial.
MHJ: What might the potential of this be for our part of the world, Australia and New Zealand, as part of this transnational and postcolonial framework?

GE: … The degree to which the impact of political claim-making by indigenous peoples has transformed the political context in the former white colonies has been a key part of the impetus I’ve been describing, and while the dynamics and departures, politically and intellectually, have their own vital particularities, they’ve also put the questions of empire and colonialism on the table in convergent ways. Obviously there are very different genealogies to how that has happened. There’s a kind of political, historiographical, analytical equivalence between trying to understand colonialism’s effects out on the overseas frontier and seeing how the metropole-colony dialectic worked at home.

MHJ: What does this mean, then, for ways in which the former colonies can ‘speak back’ to empire?

GE: I think bringing the empire home has profoundly transformed the ways in which we’re able to approach and understand British, Italian, French, German, Dutch, and Belgian history, but also US history, Russian history, and Japanese history in their respective ways. You can go case by case and see how, to varying degrees, a willingness to grapple with the histories of colonialism has encouraged a quite different set of analytics for national history and the metropolitan past. At the same time these developments are the very opposite of being uncontested. It’s not as though everybody in, say, the British historical profession now “gets” the importance of these arguments or accepts this so-called imperial turn. It’s passionately fought over still, and will continue to be so.

The new insights play forward in all sorts of ways too, most of all to how questions of race are being understood in contemporary European society. This – the long-lasting consequences of colonialism for the metropolitan countries – is a key part of the ground from which one argues the case for taking race seriously, say in Britain or France or Germany, as something real, not in some scientific sense but as a material space in which people have learned how to dwell. ‘Race’ isn’t just wrong ideas, distorted ideas and prejudice inside people’s heads that, somehow, you can dispose of if you find the knowledge that will set minds free. It translates into a real relationship to the material world. It’s in social relations, social and cultural practices; it’s in the material environments in which people live. That’s why racism is so hard to deal with.
So the ground from which it’s now possible to think about race and racism has been freshly brought together by the new historiographies of colonialism. This ‘colonial effect’ can be traced not only in the metropolitan reverberations and longer-term legacies of the ‘scramble for Africa’ and other theatres of the ‘new imperialism’ of the last third of the nineteenth century, but also inside colonized and colonizing societies, especially via the impact of the settler colonialisms of the overseas ‘white colonies’ or the equivalent landward colonizing of contiguous territories (e.g. the relationship of Imperial and Nazi Germany to the ‘East’; Imperial Russia from the 1860s; the westward expansion of the United States), or for that matter analogously in any of the destructive and exploitative histories linking dominant cultures to indigenous ones. The ground from which we can make these arguments about the present is crucially enabled by the recognitions that are now more widespread among historians of the importance of the colony-metropole relationship.

MHJ: Do you see that sort of political impetus realising itself in European historiography now since the watershed of 2008?

GE: Probably not. How historians think about the work that they do and its purposes doesn’t change very quickly. We often appreciate more confidently how our thinking has changed and when it has changed, only after the event. That’s one of the things I wanted to get across in my Crooked Line book, namely, the messiness of intellectual change, as far as the methodologies and approaches and larger understandings of historians in relation to their work are concerned. Obviously you can locate shifts in the intellectual climate and historiographical changes fairly easily as far as the main public controversies and debates go. But actually doing the more complicated genealogies and tracing the points at which individual historians who are less visible and prominent begin to question how they’ve been doing their work before – I think that’s much more complicated.

One of the things I tried to do in that book is to model a different way of doing intellectual history, one that moves it away from the main players and tries to understand the resonance of new ideas in a more subtle way. If you take that seriously, then a big crisis like 2008 will have all sorts of reverberations, and there will be major books that are written directly in response to those events, but it won’t be clear how the landscape of ideas for discussion shifted until much later. It’s produced a lot of discussion and a lot of op-ed pieces, a lot of reflection on the part of historians in public, but I don’t think it’s dislodged the project of Europe. What I say, in response to Peter McPhee’s keynote address on what’s happening to the idea of Europe, is that if you can make a rough and ready dis-
tinction between Europe as a regime of regulation and Europe as a regime of signification and as a cultural project, then, probably from the mid-80s through to the end of the 90s, it was extraordinarily successful in both those respects.²

For instance, I think the understandings of Europe in Britain when I left in 1979 and the sort of ‘imaginative relationship’ to Europe by the mid-90s are fundamentally different, in ways that were completely un-anticipatable. You can see it in all sorts of ways. Somebody mentioned yesterday football (soccer) and the Europeanising of the public world of sports, and that provides a really striking instance. Suggesting that the UK’s daily newspapers would include continental European results week by week in the news, league tables and so on, would have seemed very implausible thirty years ago. Whereas now, that imaginative world in those ways has become completely Europeanised.

MHJ: How are historians dealing with this process, with reference to, say, your recent review of works about ‘Europe after 1945’?³

GE: Some major new general histories have begun to rethink the twentieth century in light of its second half – Mark Mazower’s Dark Continent (1998) and Tony Judt’s Postwar (2005) are the best – and I have to write my own now as soon as humanly possible. Any European historian worth her or his salt, whichever their national history, has to think transnationally in genuinely ‘European’ terms now, if only as a kind of meta-commitment. So even if you’re still working avowedly inside a national history, the possibility of evading those broader European questions or tacitly setting them aside is diminished; otherwise you’re cut off from the main ground of discussion with your colleagues. I think there are all sorts of pressures toward ‘thinking European’ rather than ‘thinking national’, whether it’s inside one’s own work per se or in collaborations. And of course collaboration is the key in that respect, because it’s very hard for one person to do everything that a fully European history entails, whether it’s for linguistic reasons or simply because of the practicalities of how much reading across multiple topics and countries and specialities any one person can realistically accomplish. So any of the most ambitious projects,

2  Peter McPhee, ‘Provincialising Europe from Within: Old Faultlines and New Separatism’, paper presented at 23rd meeting of the Australasian Association for European History (AAEH), Wellington, 3 July 2013.  
whether conceived transnationally or as genuinely European work, should presuppose collaboration. Historians traditionally haven’t done that very much and I think one of the good things that comes out of this structure of European funding that I started out mentioning is the encouragement toward collaboration, whether via conferences or collaborative workshops or longer-term research projects. So in those terms I think it’s becoming impossible to do one’s work in an individuated, isolated way now. Or it’s much harder to do so.

MHJ: Do you think younger people looking to pursue European history should be exploiting these trends, and how can they go about that?

GE: I think it means using all the chances available to be in conversation with other people. It can be very hard when you’re writing a dissertation because of the pressure to do it quickly. I’m sure that’s as true here as it is in Britain. Pressure is a bit less in the US, I think, but there’s still a lot of pushing to get people through. So when you’re doing your research and writing under those circumstances it’s much harder to make the time to be in a collective conversation. In a lot of ways that pressure also translates into a kind of competitive drive so that people can even be reluctant, in some protective kind of way, to share their work. It seems to me that it’s incredibly important to find ways of working collectively – whether it’s through meetings like this (AAEH) and the networks that can result – or inside institutional or regional clusters of institutions. It’s incredibly important to be in conversation with people who are doing similar work, and that’s where it has to start. It can translate over time; you’re laying the ground for collaboration over time. My sense is that it should be pretty easy to do that here. Obviously Australia is a huge country so it’s much easier to do it in the south-east corner than it is if you’re in Perth. But now we have email and Dropbox and all the new means of electronic communication – there are all sorts of ways in which the new technology facilitates collaborative projects that are dispersed over huge geographical distances, but are nonetheless completely manageable. I think the more you can do that the better.

MHJ: I wanted to talk about some of the reflections from A Crooked Line about the possibility of negotiating the imperative of social history and what might be broadly termed ‘the postmodern’. Have you seen that happen?

In a lot of ways it was already happening. I wanted to write the book to make the point that we were beyond the culture wars and it was time to stop worrying about those differences. I think to a great degree those fights between social historians and cultural historians during the 1990s came from
particular kinds of generational angst. Basically, they involved disagreements and problems that were internal to the generations that included my own, whose main inclinations were of the broadly left-progressive kind. That’s where the best history has been produced in the period since the ‘60s: from left historians interested in doing work in ways that both produced new knowledge, and did so usefully - from those generations who were trained between the late 60s and, let’s say, the early 80s. Some people took what we now call the ‘cultural turn’, and other people hugely resisted it, and they fought each other. They fought each other to a standstill by the late 90s.

Meanwhile the contraction of opportunity in higher education in the course of the later 1970s through the 80s led to a sort of missing generation. We’d have to confirm this from the data collected by the AHA and the other professional associations, but arguably there were fewer graduate students and smaller cohorts of PhD students during the 1980s, which then allowed the 60s and 70s cohorts to exercise their influence more powerfully and completely than might otherwise have been the case – all the more so because they were now in the process of establishing their leadership in departments and the public sphere of the profession.

Really important things were at stake, politically and intellectually. So these weren’t just debates of an esoteric, ivory tower kind. They were all about the kind of politics we can call identitarian – the grounds were always far more complicated, but that’s the easy shorthand to use. I was very much involved in those debates myself, and for me the really intense period of struggle around these questions was from the late 1980s to the 1990s, which of course coincided with huge changes in the actually existing worlds of capitalism and politics. So at the very time that people like me were struggling to understand how to address questions that weren’t as easily dealt with inside a classical materialist framework - whether it came from Marxism or other kinds of sociology – the world surrounding us changed. Amid the resulting crises of thought and belief, there wasn’t the same kind of confidence that received forms of understanding could do the job anymore.

During the 1990s higher education started to loosen up again so that more people were coming into history graduate studies, there were more jobs, and there was great intellectual excitement around the leading debates. I think those cohorts coming to graduate school during the course of the 1990s, who were trained during that period and emerged into the profession in the late 90s and early 2000s, had far less investment in the differences and disagreements that motivated the preceding generations of the

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60s and 70s and their earliest students. They didn’t care about those differences between social history and cultural history. So at the very end of the *Crooked Line* book I tried to cite a few examples of people whose work really didn’t fit those old distinctions but were instead very mobile across them. I think that has continued to be the case. I don’t think anyone worries about the distinction between social history and cultural history anymore.

**MHJ: How do the new generation of historians coming through now respond to those debates?**

One of the ambitions of that book was to make the case for the importance of recuperating all sorts of things from those earlier periods of work, so that you can take the cultural turn without somehow unlearning or forgetting everything that was accomplished earlier, all the gains that were made during the period when social history was so exciting. It ought to be possible to move forward whilst carrying along those earlier forms of knowledge that are going to continue to be helpful. So in those terms I think it’s always important not to assume that useful knowledge only began yesterday. And there are ways in which it is easier to make that case now than it was ten years ago. The book that came out in 2005 was actually written in 2003 and 2004, and it went back to a talk that I gave in the fall of 2002. It seemed to me a very good moment around 2002 to be making this argument, partly to bring closure to that earlier internecine fighting, partly to make the case for a forward-moving kind of synthesis, but partly also because the surrounding world, under the impact of globalisation, was changing in incredibly worrying and dangerous ways. Of course this was after 9/11. If we didn’t believe in grand narratives, then the powers in the world certainly did, and those new grand narratives were in process of transforming the world incredibly successfully. We needed to think in those earlier societal terms again, not by disavowing the cultural turn, but again by finding ways to move forward using the various registers of knowledge and analysis available.

I think your generation is the beneficiary of all those important debates. Now that those debates have occurred it’s possible just to move forward with really interesting and important projects that draw upon the best knowledge that’s going to be appropriate for the questions you want to ask. It’s all about knowledge for questions, in my view. I believe in eclecticism. Make use of whatever works for the kind of questions you want to ask. Everything doesn’t have to fit holistically together, because the world is a messy place.

**MHJ: Can you tell me about your talk today, and what you’re working on at**
the moment?

I published my history of the Left, *Forging Democracy*, in 2002 and it was really important to me that it be a genuinely European history, so not just France, Britain, Germany, maybe Italy, with Russia coming in and out. If you have that purpose, then those conventional binaries of East and West become a huge drag on one’s understanding. Now I have to write this 20th century history of Europe. There’s a new Cambridge multi-volume history of Europe that I signed up to do the 20th century volume for. In thinking about that assignment, I wanted to write it in a way that honours the continent as a whole, by respecting the unevenness, the differences, and the complexities inside Europe. That’s what today’s talk presupposes and reflects. It tries to work against the conventional geography of our understanding of European history. It asks what differences emerge and what other perspectives and questions come into focus, once you dismantle that most conventional binary framework of the West and the East. We might say the same about the North and the South, as the Alps and the Pyrenees are quite as vital a boundary as the Rhine and the Elbe. What other axes of comparison emerge at different times and for different purposes between different parts of the continent? And what actually constitutes a European generality, or what general European commonalities are there, and how much qualification do they need? What sort of regional patterns are there inside Europe and for what purposes?

**MHJ: What are your other current and future projects?**

The history of Europe has to be the next priority. I have other things I need to finish. My very first book was on the German Right and its transformations between the 1890s and the 1920s. That was my attempt to figure out a better basis for understanding the context of German fascism and where Nazism comes from. I’ve gone back to that, and I’m about three quarters of the way through a book called *Genealogies of Nazism* that revisits those questions to see what still works and what needs to be rethought and done differently. Also in the drawer is an unfinished book on liberalism, popular politics, and the national state in Germany between the 1840s and 1880s. I have a long-term interest in history and film that’s waiting on the back burner. Finally, someday I’d still like to be able to write a history of the British left intelligentsia between the 1930s and the 1980s.

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