Discussion

Derek Sayer:

Let me first take the 'old Derek Sayer' and 'new Derek Sayer' issue. Well, I must be getting old! I suppose I see what you mean when you say there is a contrast, but in some ways I do not experience such a contrast myself. There are a lot of threads that ran right through, and I would like to mention a couple of them because they relate to some of the other questions you asked me. One goes back to my Ph.D dissertation, which eventually became a book called *Marx's Method*. Part of what I was doing at the time was trying to argue against the notion of theory in Althusserian Marxism, which I experienced as a paralysing intellectual terrorism. The idea seemed to be that we cannot do anything until we get the concepts sorted out, and conversely that we *can* get the concepts sorted out before we do anything. Both positions I found (and still find) inane. Against this I wanted to insist that the starting-point and finishing-point of Marx's analysis was in the phenomenal world, the world of experience. And the proper test for analysis was its capacity to make sense of experience. In that book and others I developed a critique of what I called 'violent abstraction', which has remained central to my work ever since. For instance I am unhappy with attributing agency to an object called 'the state', or using 'a state' as an unproblematic framework within which or of which to write a history. I would like to argue that there is no such thing as *'the state'*. But there is, on the one hand, governance, the practices of rule, which are frequently disunited, incoherent and fragmented, and, on the other, attempts to reconstruct, to represent these as some*thing* which has unity, solidity, temporal continuity and so forth, as 'the state'. From this point of view I want to critique, in the sense of both criticising and historically situating –the notion of critique I spelled out in *Marx's Method* and *The Violence of Abstraction*– many of our taken for granted categories of analysis themselves. To be, in today's terminology, 'de-constructive'. But

I have argued this for a long time.

A second point which runs through my work at least as far back as my book with Philip Corrigan, *The Great Arch*, which is about state formation, was a double argument against certain versions of discourse theory. At that time, though not now, I would have seen it in terms of their being 'insufficiently Marxist'. On the one hand, I would say that it is not *all* discourse, your analyses are at the end of the day idealistic in Marx's sense. You cannot separate the understanding of culture from the understanding of realities of political process. So we tried to think about the practical operations of governance, mundane things like tax forms, driving licences, syllabuses in schools, because these are instruments through which images and identities of states and subjects are regulatively sustained. Discourses are embedded in materialities, ways of *doing* things. But against that we equally wanted to resist traditional, including traditional Marxist, institutional conceptions of 'the state'. Ways of doing things, materialities, are permeated through and through with meanings. 'The state' is also a *mental* construction, an ideological construct, a power that operates as much in us as on us. One way to express this is that instead of talking about 'the ideological project of the state', we should be critiquing or deconstructing 'the state' *as an ideological project*, excavating how such a representation –as it is– is rendered plausible.

Both these orientations continue in my present work on Prague. What I am interested in looking at are ways in which images of identity are materially constructed, how the times and spaces of the everyday world are organised to sustain certain images of who people are. These may be images of national identity, ethnic identity, class identity, or whatever. I would continue to insist, as we did in *The Great Arch*, that this is a very material process, it is not just some discourse floating out there. It is embedded in such things as what the streets are called, whose statues adorn them, what is variously represented in institutions with names like the National Theater, National Gallery, National Museum, etc. While I accept a lot of post-structuralist arguments about the 'imagined' nature of human being, I would still want to argue that the imagining is effected and sustained by material means. The fact that something like a national community may be imagined does *not* make it any the less real. That is the first point I would make against some of the social constructivist literature.

The second is that it is not a matter of a tradition being 'invented', or a community 'imagined', and that's that. It does not stop there. Discourses have *histories*, and cannot to my mind be made sense of except historically. The

same set of symbols may be mobilised at different points in time for very different purposes by different people, their meanings are continually being reconstructed. I mentioned the example of the fifteenth century Czech religious reformer Jan Hus. In the nineteenth century he was secularised and reappropriated as a central figure of the nationalist imagination, though a problematic one because Bohemia was still an overwhelmingly Catholic country. Among other things all the streets in working-class Žižkov got their names from Hussite battles and heroes. In the first republic of 1918-38 Hus was appropriated for purposes of state, the date of his martyrdom became a state holiday –which promptly led to conflict with the Vatican– and not coincidentally, religious instructors in Czech high schools were forbidden to teach medieval history. During World War II the Hus memorial in Staroměstské náměstí, the old town square in the city centre, erected in 1915, was completely covered up with swastika flags. The really interesting thing, perhaps, is what happens after the Communist Party seizes power in 1948. From their positions in the 1930s you might expect them to dispense with all this nationalistic imagery which they had previously denounced as a cloak of bourgeois rule; especially since at the time they were very busily closing down religious institutions. What they actually did is lovingly restore Hus's Bethlehem chapel, which had been torn down two centuries before, taking enormous care with the 'authenticity' of historical details of the reconstruction. There is a plaque inside which reads 'Master Jan Hus, waiting in prison for death, laid down this charge on 10 June 1415, to all faithful Czechs: "Be kind to the Bethlehem Chapel". In fulfilment of his bequest we restored the cradle of the Czech's people's movement under the government of the people and by its will in the years 1948-54'. The key phrase here is 'the cradle of the Czech people's movement' –Hus has taken on yet another significance, allowing the past to be read anew while remaining comfortingly familiar. At the same time they purged Žižkov's Hussite street names. They removed the names of all Hussite supporters who were aristocrats, and replaced what they saw as 'right-wing' *Utraquists* with 'left-wing' *Táborites*. Thus Hus and the Hussites *are* throughout this period a symbol of the continuity of Czech identity, and the continuity is real. But at the same time it is a continuity that has been repeatedly reconstructed, and it does not exist except in those successive reconstructions.

Now I do not know whether you call this kind of work 'deconstruction' or not, or choose to put it in the post-structuralist box. I see it as an attempt to provide a careful empirical account of ways in which social identities are constructed, reconstructed, politically mobilised in a specific space over a long period of time. I do not see this as straying too far from what I did

earlier, except maybe in its somewhat manically empirical focus, its concern with detail, minutiae, with *how* meaning is constructed and sustained. But that was also, in principle at least, the project of *The Great Arch*, and my insistence of the materiality of the ideal and the ideality of the material goes back to *Marx's Method*. I do not know whether this answers your question or not.

Fuat Keyman:

So what kind of history are you proposing and what are the implications of it on re-writing history?

Derek Sayer :

So you are asking me to put a label on it, but I do not know how to. I have tried to describe and exemplify what I am doing but I do not know where it fits into your map of possible kinds of history. If you are asking me what *political* position I am coming from, that is a more difficult question to answer. Yes, I suppose I have a certain political agenda. It is probably rather a liberal one in the end. One of the reasons I am so obsessed with studying the social construction of identity and its political mobilisation is because I think the construction of imagined subjects –a nation, race, class, gender– is internal to the constitution of specifically modern forms of power. There is a process we might call forcible collectivisation which, by the erasure of multiplicities, uncertainties, and ambiguities of identity, creates imagined communities, and in so doing empowers those who can then claim to speak in their name; in the name of those they have subsumed under their totalising categories. The double meaning of the word 'representation' (or 'subject') is relevant here. In this context I find the *continuities* between nineteenth century nationalist and twentieth century communist discourses in terms of constructing subjects very interesting. It is one of the things, perhaps, which is visible from Prague in a way that it might not be from either Washington or Moscow. But I would not defend what I am doing on these grounds. I would defend it intellectually, as a way of shedding new light on what we too often take for granted, the categories grounded in *accomplished* identities which ground our analyses and debates. Like 'the state', 'ethnicity', 'Europe', or 'the West'.

Paul Langford :

The question of unit is crucial to the discussion of national identity. Who is doing the imagining and how many identities can they 'imagine'? Czechs and inhabitants of Prague have multiple identities themselves and, historically, have lived in numerous political units. You are very clearly moving in a city in which we do not see a strong city consciousness in the sense some of the Italian city states had it. Perhaps you are loading some dice by picking this city.

Derek Sayer :

You cannot study a city without the relation to the wider political formations surrounding it. In the case of Prague, these have changed several times over the period I am studying. The central question is precisely these relations. Up to 1918 Prague was the capital of Bohemia, a province of an empire ruled from Vienna. It was also a city of Czechs, Germans and Jews (who were only made distinct 'ethnic' groups as the nineteenth century progressed, but that is a different issue). In 1918 it became a *capital* city of a new country and its symbol. But first, 'Germans' were now a 'national minority' within it, something they had not been in Austria-Hungary; second, it now represented a state that was supposedly Czecho-Slovak even though its Slovak population was minuscule. After the destruction of most of the city's Jews in the Holocaust and expulsion of Germans in the *odsun*, it became, for the first time, what the Czech nationalists of the nineteenth century had claimed it to be, 'golden Slavonic Prague', a wholly Czech city. I guess my point is that rather than simply seeing what happens in Prague as *exemplifying* wider processes, which we think we already understand, we might learn something –maybe even have cause to rethink?– those processes themselves by taking the city as a vantage-point from which to re-examine them. Seeing how, for instance, the identities of 'Czech' and 'German' were constructed and reconstructed or how the boundaries of 'Eastern' and 'Western' Europe have shifted back and forth through time, rather than taking these for granted as already-known frames of reference or 'contexts' through which we look at the city and in which we place it.

Paul Langford :

You mean I might be wrong in claiming the existence of strong city consciousness?

Derek Sayer :

I do not know. Perhaps it is comparable to somewhere like Florence. But my focus was not really on 'city-consciousness' as such, I am attracted to studying the continuity of a city in a period of changing polities of which it is a part because it gives a different vantage-point from which to look at these changes, one which is not that of 'the state' itself, but instead shows the *problematic* nature of 'states' and the 'societies' they are represented as epitomising.

Fuat Keyman:

Can I add something? I was not trying to label you. If I understood you correctly, you said that we had to switch the understanding of history from centre to margin. My question is what does that mean in terms of our understanding of historical writing, in terms of re-writing of history? This is not actually your being Marxist or whatever, but what are you saying in terms of the project of writing history?

Derek Sayer:

I think one implication of what I am saying is that we must reject the distinction between the real and the imagined, much as I did many years ago the distinction between the material and the ideal. All social identities are imagined, in the sense that they are cultural artifacts, which does not make them any the less real. Methodologically this means that we have to be very careful indeed about the categories we use. We have to recognise that social categories are bound up with forms of life, they too have a history. I do not have a recipe for how to do it, but I think the very language of historical analysis needs itself to be *historically* deconstructed too. Like if we are to use the term 'nation', we need first to ask at what point did people in a particular place begin to use that term to describe themselves, what did *they* mean by it, how did that change over time. We cannot position ourselves at some Archimedean point outside history when we write it, which I believe all theories of history in the end implicitly try to do.

But *where* one positions oneself 'inside' history (or how much choice one has in the matter, anyway) is problematic. I believe the job of the historian should be to do his or her best to uncover the complexities behind what appears to be simple, and that involves looking at how the simplification itself has been accomplished. How, for example, a 'society' has come to present itself as a self-evident unit of analysis. I *don't* think this is merely an

issue of debunking the rhetorical strategies of grand narratives. I remain enough of a Marxist to think reification is a social process, and not just a category error. Or to put it in Foucaultian terms, there is an intimate relation here between forms of knowledge and forms of power. Grand narratives are not merely mistaken commentaries on modernity, they are constitutive of its subjects in much the same way as Said argued Orientalist discourses were constitutive of the subjects of colonial rule. This, in turn, means that we should be alive to what has been erased in the accomplishment of the identities such narratives re-present. We should look at 'history' as we would at a palimpsest, a tablet on which multiple scripts have been written and partially erased, and seek to recover the erasures. Such an approach to writing history is the direct opposite of the traditional goal of positivist social science, that of seeking a simple all-encompassing explanation which orders the diversity of the phenomenal world. I want rather to restore the diversities –the ambiguities, ambivalences, the multiplicities– that are effaced when identity translates itself into power, and power represents itself as identity. And I think this can –and should– be studied empirically. Let me try to exemplify what I mean.

In 1820 the poet Jan Kollár published a famous cycle of poems, *The Daughter of Slavia*. Tomáš Masaryk, first President of Czechoslovakia, later hailed it as a seminal text of the Czech 'national revival' and a jewel of modern Czech literature. Though Jan Kollár wrote in Czech he was, by modern criteria, a Slovak. Then as now, spoken Czech and Slovak were for the most part mutually intelligible. Nevertheless the language in which Kollár wrote was closer to the Czech spoken in Bohemia than in Slovakia (or as it then was, upper Hungary). In the 1840s Ludovít Štúr formalised a distinct Slovak written language. Kollár, among others, strongly objected, holding Czech and Slovak to be two dialects of one language rather than separate languages. Let us now move on 150 or so years. After the 1989 Velvet Revolution, arguments developed rapidly in what was still Czechoslovakia about relations between Czech and Slovak nations. One point of contention was the language of the presidential standard which had flown over Prague castle since 1920. The Slovak side saw the Czech wording *'Pravda vítězí'*, which means 'Truth will prevail', as a national slight. Had this been in Slovak, there would have been a difference of one letter. The issue was eventually resolved by a compromise; they adopted the Latin motto *'veritas vincit'*.

The point of the story –to come back to Fuat's question– is that there is *no* ultimate, ontologically secure vantage-point in all this, from which (or of which) one might write a history. In this case 'languages' come to define

'nations', but the boundaries of languages themselves were not simply given; rather, the very act of standardising them itself conjured up new linguistic communities abstracted out of multiple shades of difference, and set clear borders where there had formerly been uncertain horizons. Dictionaries and grammars are practical instruments of state formation, means through which populations are nationalised. Where does one position oneself in all this? I guess I see it as most worthwhile simply to try and *describe* it, being as alive to its complexities, and suspicious of simplifying generalisations, as one can be.

I am taking the same stance as I did this morning which is that at the end of the day I think the most significant questions are empirical ones. Imagined communities are material realities whose construction is open to empirical inquiry. I am interested in the act of producing a twenty-eight volume Czech national encyclopedia at the end of the nineteenth century because it was one of the means through which a national community, sinewing a people and a territory, was represented –statistically, diagrammatically, historically, visually– and that representation was itself an act of construction. I am interested which language, Czech or German, was used in offices, courts, schools, as a practical means through which language was nationalised. I was not trying to say that in general we should switch our understanding of history from centre to margin, but that I found Prague interesting because studying it offered a new perspective on how our political and conceptual landscapes of centre and margin, East and West and so on are constructed. I have *no* answer to the question what does 'the project of writing history' mean. There are as many possible answers as there are times and places in which histories might be written. In the end I find doing history more interesting than theorising about what is involves in doing it. I think I have ceased to be a social theorist!

Derek Sayer: (in response to a question from the floor)

I think the most important event in the twentieth century history of the Czech lands, in terms of its implications for social identity, is the expulsion of the Germans after World War II, and before that the destruction of the Czech Jewish community in the Holocaust. You are absolutely right and what you say raises a lot of questions about communism and the national state, and the way communists appropriated the nationalist discourse of the nineteenth century as an ingredient of their own totality. They were able to do so because they had the power to kick out of the country people whose presence contradicted its (and their) representation of Czechness and Czech history.

Thus after the war a multitude of German names or names with German associations disappeared from Czech maps; the record of German presence was wiped clean, so that there was nothing in the experiential landscape to give the lie to narratives of identity. Communism was claimed as the culmination of a *national* project, going back to Hus and beyond. My favourite example is the renaming of what had been the centre of German social life, the Casino on *Na příkopě* in Prague. It became the '*Slovanský dům*', the Slavonic house.