



**Martin Nodl.** *Dějepisectví mezi vědou a politikou: Úvahy o historiografii 19. a 20. století* (deutsch: *Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik. Erwägungen über die Historiographie des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*). Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2007. 263 S. ISBN 978-80-7325-112-3.

**Reviewed by** Maciej Górny

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2008)

## M. Nodl: *Dejepisectví mezi vedou a politikou*

Martin Nodl belongs to the younger generation of Czech historians. He is at the same time one of the most prominent figures of the historical profession because he sharply criticizes an older generation of scholars, most of them having their career in the last decades of Communist Czechoslovakia, for their moral attitudes. This has earned him the reputation of being an enfant terrible, which is reinforced in view of his espousal of new methodological trends that – as he argues – alone are capable of overcoming the alleged Czech backwardness in that respect. Controversial as Nodl is, he belongs to the hard-working and widely publishing authors. *Dějepisectví mezi vědou a politikou* (History between science and politics) documents his scientific activities of the last decade.

The book contains almost completely already published articles. The author did not revise them above the minimal necessary level. Consequently there are relatively many spelling mistakes in the Czech text as well as in foreign names and in the quotations. Some of the footnotes refer to the texts written by Nodl, which despite their new titles, are included into the collective volume. Given the character of the book, replacing those footnotes with cross-references within the volume would have been beneficial for the reader. All texts are accompanied by a large number of bibliographical references and the volume includes also a selected bibliography and an index.

Nodl's work consists of nine articles divided into three sections. The first section describes the academic biographies of two Czech historians (Václav Vladivoj Tomek, Bedřich Mendl) as well as the main research fields of the German mediaevalists of the Czech lands prior to 1945. The second section under the somehow misleading title "In the Marxist captivity" refers to the Marxist Czech historiography as well as to the impact of the "Annales" school on Czech, Polish and West German historiography. The third section analyses two methodological trends in mediaeval studies: prosopography and microhistory.

The majority of the selected material is written in a similar didactic "handbook" manner. The author pays attention to the factual content rather than to the style of writing. The inner logic of the book is repeatedly highlighted by the author. According to Nodl *Dějepisectví mezi vědou a politikou* is an attempt at writing the history of the economic and social historiography on the Czech lands from their beginnings in the 19th century to the developments of the last decades.

The first text is devoted to one of the outsiders of the Czech national historiography, Václav Vladivoj Tomek. The conservative profile of the historian as well as his critical distance to the founding father of the Czech modern historiography (and leader of the national movement) František Palacký deeply influenced the popular interpretation of Tomek and his works. Nodl questions this

picture pointing at positive and close relations between Tomek and Palacký. The differences between both historians hadn't been at all as substantial as later accounts suggest. The next article depicts main research topics and scholars working on the German economic history of the Czech lands. Nodl underlines here the similarities between Czech and German scholars in Bohemia, being exposed to the same methodological impulses and engaged in the same political debates. Both groups used historical arguments to support the thesis of their historical rights in Bohemia. The last text in the first section of the book analyses the works of one of the actors of that debates, the prominent Czech historian of economy Bedřich Mendl.

The most thought-provoking chapter of Nodl's book refers to the post-war Czech historiography. His analysis of the Marxist-Leninist historiography does not repeat a popular simplistic interpretation but tends to a careful historicisation of the phenomenon. He acknowledges the close interference of Marxist methodology and the nationalist narratives. In his text devoted to the impact of the *Annales* school, Nodl carefully weighs the methodological influences on the Central European historiographies stressing the role of politics as well as on the tradition of national historiography. In his opinion the Polish historiography belonged to the most diligent recipients of the French impulses, despite the hindrance of the iron curtain. In contrary to the Poles, the Czech historiography underwent a highly destructive phase of political cleansing that cut the link to the more developed historical sciences in the West. On the other hand, West-German scholars developed a closer scientific dialogue with the *Annales* school much later and this even though in their case no political obstacles existed.

Both, the first and the second section of the book deliver a highly interesting and well structured selection of articles comparing several national historiographies within and outside of Bohemia. As mentioned above, the text is written rather normatively and this adds to the impression that the author should have provided information that may not be obvious for the Czech-reading audience. The frequent appearance of undefined professional notions as well as confusing information should have been avoided. Thus formulations like *the rather controversial Otto Brunner* (p. 46) would have been of use only if supplied with some information on Brunner's life and work. Karl Lamprecht's model characterised by Nodl as the *alternative to the positivist historiography* (p. 71) can be as legitimately perceived as a positivist model opposing the German historicist tradition. Maria

Janion is not a philosopher, but the most prominent Polish historian of literature. If the Czech historiography of the 1970s and 1980s did not catch up with the development in the West because of the primordial character of the communist regime – as claimed by the author – and this situation did not change after 1989, it would have been appropriate to look for some non-political reasons for the state of the art of the Czech historiography. Unfortunately, the author abstains from this effort. Apparently Nodl's perception of the newer Czech historiography is by far more critical than his attitude towards the elder authors, including those who shaped the Marxist-Leninist national narrative. Nodl looks for the equivalents of the methodological impulses from the West in the Czech historiography of the 20th century to find that František Graus studied the mediaeval mentalities as early as in the late 1950s being in some respects a precursor of that new branch of historiography (p. 167). However, if the similar logic would be applied to other historiographies, it wouldn't be difficult to prove that some works of Stefan Czarnowski bear even more traces of similarity with the *Annales* attitude. Czarnowski was known in French as soon as 1919, in contrast to the respective work by Graus. Czarnowski, Stefan, *Le culte des héros et ses conditions sociales. Saint Patrick héros national de l'Irlande*, Paris 1919. Having said that, I don't want to enter the *competition of the forerunners* regarding the most prominent European historical school, but I rather question the sense of creating the *protochronist* discourse altogether. The question of recognition of methodological impulses is too complicated to be answered only on the basis of chronology. The argument that certain authors were well familiar with the newest methodological developments but ignored it completely in their own works, has to be supported by convincing evidence. If it is not the case, Nodl's opinion on the state of mind of František Graus (p. 128) remains sheer speculation.

The last section of the book by Martin Nodl sketches the methodological currents that may influence the mediaeval studies of the subsequent years. With a good orientation in Polish and German historiography Nodl characterises main developments after the climax of the influence of the *Annales* school.

A separate issue is the construction of Nodl's book and the self-stylisation of its author. Nine texts are accompanied by the introduction and *somehow confusing* closing remarks under the title *History of historiography as ego-histoire*. This article contains a detailed reconstruction of the genesis of the texts in the book as well

as it offers deep insights into the professional and intellectual development of its author. It is obviously a matter of taste, how deeply one can analyse his own intellectual biography. In my opinion Nodl's text goes simply too far in the application of the principle of *âego-histoire*. It would have been of benefit to the reader, if the author had more diligently revised his selected texts instead of assuring that *ât first glance independent*, in fact they are bound by the delicate thread (p. 233).

To sum up: the factual content of *âDějepisectvÅ mezi vÅdou a politikou* offers a highly informative account

of the Czech historiography in the international context. The author's knowledge of the topic is very good, so that several factual mistakes and logical gaps do not change the general positive impression. The deficits of the book lie mostly in its literary style. Given the didactic character of the text, some parts of it might have been extended. On the other hand some of the facts referring to the intellectual biography of the author and of the texts could have been left out without any substantial loss.

Annotation:

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Maciej Górný. Review of Nodl, Martin, *Dějepisectví mezi vÅdou a politikou: Úvahy o historiografii 19. a 20. století (deutsch: Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik. Erwågungen über die Historiographie des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts)*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22321>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.