

An Interview with Joan-Pau Rubiés

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Joan-Pau Rubiés graduated in Early Modern History at the University of Barcelona with an extraordinary degree prize, and in 1992 he obtained his PhD at King's College, University of Cambridge. He was subsequently Research Fellow at Queens's College, Cambridge; Jean Monnet Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence; Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Reading; and Reader in International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In 2012 he accepted the offer of a Research Professorship at the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA), which he holds at Universitat Pompeu Fabra. He is specialised in the study of cross-cultural encounters in the early modern world, from a perspective combining the contextual analysis of travel accounts and other ethnographic sources with the intellectual history of early modern Europe. Recent work has focused in particular on the analysis of early modern ethnography (literary and visual) and its intellectual impact in the period 1500-1800. This has involved developing various lines of research, including the history of travel, cross-cultural diplomacy, religious missions, early orientalism, race and racism, and the history of cosmopolitanism. His publications include *Travellers and Cosmographers: Studies in the History of Early Modern Travel and Ethnology* (London: Ashgate, 2007) and *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes (1250-1625)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), as well as the pioneering edited collection (with Jaś Elsner) *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* (London, 1999). In recent years, he has been working on the development a global comparative perspective on these various topics (encompassing both Asia and the New World) that might help interrogate critically the Eurocentric categories of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. He is currently leading a research project in Barcelona on Ethnographies, Cultural Encounters and Religious Missions in the Early Modern Iberian World. He hopes to complete soon a new monograph *Europe's New Worlds: Travel Writing and the Origins of the Enlightenment* (with CUP), and for the Hakluyt Society, the critical edition, with an extensive introductory study, *Renaissance Methods for Travel*.

How did you become interested in early-modern ethnography?

I reached this topic by means of a more general question in what we might broadly define as cultural history. The starting point of my research career was a question about the study of changing perceptions, which in reality can be split in two issues: reconstructing how people from the past, in different societies with different cultural assumptions, perceived and thought about historical realities, and analysing how these perceptions and ideas changed with changing circumstances. During my undergraduate degree at the University of Barcelona in the mid 1980s, which

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encompassed ancient, medieval and early modern history, I quickly became dissatisfied with the two main analytical categories then current amongst historians interested in such questions: “ideology”, and “mentalities”. The former, ideology, tended to reduce the historical significance of cultural discourses to justifications of political and social agendas, failing to capture the complex nature of human motivations and identities (this reductionism owes something to the influence of Marxism, which remained strong at Spanish universities during the country’s transition to democracy). The latter, mentality, targeted a broader range of cultural beliefs and practices, but tended to reify cultures as collective systems of belief, and was often very vague when it came to defining internal plurality, individual agency and the mechanisms for cultural change. With these issues in mind, I did some pre-doctoral work on the history of historiography, with a study of the cultural and ideological assumptions of the fourteenth century chronicler of the Crown of Aragon Ramon Muntaner, and wrote a substantial thesis (what was then called a *Tesi de Llicenciatura*) on the political and economic thought of a Catalan nobleman in Habsburg Spain, Don Francisco Gilabert, in the early seventeenth century. These two works of intellectual history, besides the obvious effort of connecting the expression of ideas to particular biographical experiences and historical contexts, allowed me to understand the importance of identifying in more detail the assumptions and possibilities provided by different educational backgrounds and literary genres. However, I felt the need to face the issue of cultural diversity more directly, that is, not simply by dealing with our ancestors as cultural others, but also by considering how they themselves perceived and interpreted cultural differences. For this reason, and in order to develop a model in the history of perceptions that offered a higher degree of analytical resolution, for my doctoral degree, which I fortunately (thanks to a full external scholarship from King’s College) I was able to pursue at the University of Cambridge, I decided to focus on late medieval and early modern ethnographic sources, within the complex set of genres that constitute travel writing. The question I proposed to myself for the thesis that would become the basis for my *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance* (a book many years in the making) was not simply how members of one society may perceive other cultures, by means of a systematic analysis of specific travel accounts, but also how to distinguish the assumptions and motivations of different kinds of travellers; how to define and measure the cultural distance between observers and observed; how to reconstruct the process of cross-cultural interpretation (which led me to a stronger emphasis on the mechanisms for cultural learning); how to identify the specific possibilities and constraints posed by different genres, literary and visual; and finally how to reconstruct the dynamics of cultural and intellectual change over longer periods. Ethnography is a wonderful documentary source to explore all these questions. It also helped me develop my own methodology, one which placed the analysis of interactions alongside the analysis of discourse. In retrospect, what I was looking for was a hybrid between the new cultural history, and the history of ideas in contexts. I was lucky that the University of Cambridge was at that point, between 1987 and 1993, a privileged place

for both, although they were usually done quite separately, and I had to bring them together in my own research practice.

And what, in your personal journey, led you to tackle early-modern ethnography in the context of South India in your first monograph?

From the start, my aim was to tackle the early modern genre of travel writing in its variety, and to analyse ethnography a variety of contexts, all of which would require to work through a series of case-studies. Given that I was already quite familiar, through my education in Barcelona, with Spanish sources on the discovery and conquest of America, which of course I have always had in mind, it seemed to me that the more interesting challenge for my PhD in a British University was to widen my horizons to encompass what we may call the global Renaissance, and to tackle descriptions of Asia produced throughout the sixteenth century in Portuguese, Italian, English, French and any other languages I managed to read. This would have been almost impossible to do in Spain back in 1987, the bibliographical resources simply did not exist (this was of course before the internet and the world wide web became available). At that point Donald F. Lach's *Asia in the Making of Europe* became a wonderful resource, for which I was very grateful. There was also a lively debate about Edward's Said's *Orientalism* that invited a response. Although at first I read everything connected to the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* and the Catholic eastern missions, from Persia to India, South-East Asia, Japan and China, it soon became obvious that a systematic case-study for a period longer than a century demanded a much sharper regional focus. There were particularly rich and varied sources for South India, including the Malabar coast and the empire of Vijayanagara, that suggested the possibility of such a case study, and I soon found that there were additional intellectual reasons to pursue it: first, because India had always been part of the European imagination, not only through the legacy of ancient Greek sources, but also thanks to the existence of extraordinary late medieval travellers such as Marco Polo. This made it possible to deepen the analysis of changing perceptions in the *longue durée*. Second, South India was, unlike the Mughal empire, in large part ruled by Hindus, and this allowed me to devote particular attention to one important topic that interested me, the Renaissance conceptualisation of civilisation in relation to 'gentile' religious traditions, a distinction which prompted political and religious strategies different to those reserved for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Let me add quickly that this Indian case-study was never meant to be the end of the matter, and I have subsequently continued to analyse sources concerning other parts of the world, including the Ottoman empire, Persia, China, Japan and the Philippines, as well as, of course, the New World.

Can you tell us something about the main influences and encounters that have oriented your intellectual trajectory?

I owe a first debt of gratitude to Josep Maria Salrach, an excellent Catalan medievalist who first prompted me to study the political, social and religious ideas of the medieval historians of the Crown of Aragon when I was still an undergraduate. In Barcelona I

also received much support for my research on Gilabert, a figure that had attracted the occasional attention of historians like Jim Amelang, but not yet a systematic monograph. It was, however, through my doctoral research that I was able to develop a more ambitious intellectual project. As I mentioned, in the late 1980s and early 1990s Cambridge was an ideal environment to pursue my research project, and I benefited immensely from many of the intellectual friendships I formed in that period, many of which lasted me for many years afterwards. I was supervised by Anthony Pagden, who besides being an excellent historian of the intellectual aspects of the European Encounter with the New World (his *The Fall of Natural Man* remains a classic), also introduced me to the seminars of the then flourishing Cambridge school in the history of political thought, which emphasised reconstructing with great rigour the intellectual context for the production and reception of early modern ideas, and developed strategies (albeit not always successfully executed) for the avoidance of anachronistic and teleological interpretations. Not only did I benefit from direct contact with scholars like Istvan Hont, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, Mike Schoenscher and many others, but also (and probably more important) developed lasting personal and intellectual friendships with many of my no-less impressive contemporaries conducting doctoral and postdoctoral research within that environment, including Peter N. Miller, Béla Kapossy, David Armitage and Melissa Calaresu (whom I also married, so in this case the personal aspect goes much further). However valuable this was for my development as an intellectual historian, my own project was quite far from the dominant focus on European political thought that characterised at that point what is known as the Cambridge School, and I found myself exploiting a much broader range of encounters and opportunities, including classicists, literary scholars, anthropologists, historians of science, and cultural historians more broadly. During Pagden's sabbatical Peter Burke became my second supervisor, and besides benefiting from his extraordinary learning, the seminars he led in the new methodologies in the cultural history of early modern Europe offered a wonderful complement to my exposure to the history of ideas. I also enormously enjoyed participating in an exciting reading group that included Simon Schaffer, an innovative historian of science who enhanced my appreciation of the value of a sociological and sceptical approach to the history of knowledge (although I would not call myself a radical relativist as a result). One of my closest friends during those years, the brilliant classicist Jaś Elsner, was also interested in the question of historicising subjectivity, and he has remained a permanent interlocutor – it was with him that we sketched a cultural history of travel from antiquity to science fiction in *Voyages and Visions* (1999). I also benefited from friendship and conversations with literary scholars and historians of the book, such as Bill Sherman, and with a historian of medieval religious encounters, Harvey Hames. To sum up, although I had gone to Cambridge with clear research questions and methodological concerns in mind, there I was able to combine an extraordinary range of positive influences that had the benefit of marrying learning and friendship.

The story of course did not end in Cambridge, and over the years I have been privileged to be able to cultivate many other intellectual friendships and collaborations

of lasting value. These include an outstanding historian of the Jesuit missions to India, Ines G. Županov, whom I met in Florence in 2001 at an important conference on the Jesuit missions, and who later hosted me in Paris; and the historian of early modern Catholicism Simon Ditchfield, with whom I often collaborated when he was editor of the *Journal of Early Modern History*. Dan Carey at the University of Galway has also become a long-term companion in the pursuit of a history of travel and travel writing. Among the many exciting opportunities provided by international conferences and events, I was particularly grateful for the invitation to re-think idolatry in a Princeton seminar organised by Jonathan Sheehan and Anthony Grafton, whose erudite scholarship is also, of course, another very important influence. At the University of Reading I devised a very satisfying course on the comparative history of early modern colonial empires that I later transferred, with equal success, to the London School of Economics and Political Science. Finally, the masters course I taught at the LSE on the history of cultural encounters from the Renaissance to modernity, first in collaboration with the historian of South Asia Joya Chatterji, and later with Sujit Sivasundaram, was central to the development of my expertise towards larger questions in imperial and colonial history. I still teach a version of this course in Barcelona, with my colleagues Manel Ollé, a sinologist, and Alexandre Coello de la Rosa, a historian of the Jesuit missions.

In your research, you have shown how visual sources are critical to our understanding of cultural exchange, the conceptualisation of human diversity, and the negotiations between European observers' pre-existent cultural palimpsests and actual cross-cultural encounters. What do you think about recent trends in the use of visual sources in (new) cultural history?

The new cultural history has given a strong impulse to rethinking how we use images as historical evidence. In reality there is a long and distinguished tradition of using art historical sources (and other kinds of material culture) to illuminate the cultural history of a period alongside literary ones, but you cannot ask exactly the same questions with the same methodologies, nor is it entirely satisfactory to simply use these materials to help draw the picture of 'the spirit of an epoch,' like Jacob Burckhardt did when interpreting the Italian Renaissance for the nineteenth century. Nowadays images and objects do not simply have an original context of production and an artistic genealogy, they also have multiple uses, and these tell us a great deal about changing perceptions and social practices. This is especially fruitful when we can interpret them contextually with the help of other kinds of sources. For the purposes of my research, visual sources with an ethnographic content are of course at the heart of my question about the history of perceptions, but there is the danger of simply assuming that a drawing or a painting is somewhat transparent, and can be simply used to illustrate what we know from textual sources, rather than offering a distinctive problem of interpretation. What is the difference between a mental image and an artistic image, and between an image and text, I asked myself? I was able to deal with some of these issues with my contribution to a British Museum project on the American drawings of John White,

who worked alongside Thomas Harriot in the first English colony in Virginia, and also thanks to another invitation that I received from Joan-Lluís Palos at the University of Barcelona to write about early modern artistic images of savages and civilised. In more recent years, I have started more systematic work on visual ethnographic albums of the sixteenth century, beginning with the Boxer Codex produced in Manila c. 1592, which has the distinctive feature that the texts written by Spanish and Portuguese observers were illustrated by a Chinese artist with access to Chinese books. It is a bit of an enigma, which I believe the book we recently published with Manel Ollé has helped clarify.

A logocentric historiography might be interpreted as epistemologically Eurocentric; from this perspective, do you think that recent trends, e.g. in the study of material culture, have helped to decolonise (new) cultural history? Are there other re-evaluations of themes and sources that you find particularly productive in this regard?

Let me answer this by saying that although I appreciate the value and potential in all kinds of historical sources, I am most familiar with textual analysis, and I believe that written sources remain indispensable for a vast range of historical questions, including those that have driven my research. As Peter N. Miller has shown in his magnificent work on the Provençal antiquarian Peiresc, those early modern scholars who first drew attention to the importance of material culture for understanding the past (including periods other than the ancient world) were polyglots and polymaths who treated the document itself as yet another object, and we can in turn study them because they left us written archives (Peiresc spent hours writing letters every day). The new fields of cultural history that deal with material culture are not unlike those who work with archaeology and art in that they must develop specific and often very sophisticated methodologies, but are best served by the ability to combine material evidence with textual evidence, and to treat textual evidence as material evidence. You do however raise an important issue, which is the bias generated by the irregular availability of textual sources across cultural traditions. This creates, indeed, a Eurocentric bias, but it would be more accurate to say that it creates a bias towards those literate civilisations whose records have been preserved. A historian of, let us say, the Mexica or the Incas will of course be able to exploit archaeological information, but must by necessity also take account of those sources written during the early stages of the Spanish colonial period, and will cautiously read these Spanish sources critically, even sceptically and ‘against the grain,’ with reference to all the assumptions and agendas of self-serving conquerors and settlers, or of those zealous missionaries who recorded Indian customs and religious beliefs in order to identify and annihilate what they believed was demonic idolatry. Historians of early modern global intellectual history and cultural encounters do thankfully have the opportunity to be able cross, or at least compare, European and non-European sources, and the latter are especially abundant in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian languages. Few scholars can alone read all these languages, but scholars can collaborate to do comparative history, or *histoire*

croisée, and of course scholarly translations and editions of significant sources remain a fundamental resource which we must never cease to foster and appreciate. I have recently explored the potential of a *longue-durée* comparative history of the genre of travel writing in Europe and China in collaboration with Manel Ollé, a colleague who is a sinologist at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, and I am hoping to be able to pursue a more ambitious project in the future with the inclusion of sources in Arabic and Persian. The archive of world history remains nonetheless heterogeneous in its quantity and quality, and this is a fact that we must acknowledge and learn to compensate for. The combination of a sceptical reading of European sources with the use of those non-European sources that are available, as well as material culture when possible, offers a more interesting possibility than simply ritually denouncing a Eurocentric bias.

Your most recent and ongoing work tackles how travel accounts contributed to some of the concerns that lie at the origins of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, a historical category that appears particularly susceptible of mobilising opinions - perhaps because it is never entirely retrospective, as Katherine O'Brien wrote in 2010 -, seems to have regained a special centrality since the 2000s. Recent years have seen historiographical (re)assessments, proposals for radical re-orientations of periodisations, canons, and geographical-linguistic corpora and case studies. What do you think a long-period perspective, and the study of processes straddling Renaissance and Enlightenment, can bring to current debates?

Thanks, this is a great question. You are right that I have been increasingly concerned with the intellectual impact of travel writing, first in relation to what we might term the global Renaissance, and more recently in relation to the origins of the Enlightenment. In both cases, the very categories of 'Renaissance' and 'Enlightenment' need to be interrogated critically, and as you rightly point out, this also involves taking account of how early modern European scholars and thinkers understood their own times, in relation to the classical past, and in relation to the future of mankind (because 'lumières' started as a celebration of the achievements of modern learning, and became in the end a project about rethinking critically human nature, human civilisation, and its capacity for progress). The sustained expansion of geographical horizons, and the massive production and circulation of detailed accounts of non-European religions, customs and systems of government, made a defining contribution to many of the philosophical and historiographical debates of the early modern period, including the very notion of global modernity and a cosmopolitan consciousness that was full of contradictions. Adopting a *longue-durée* perspective that encompasses the whole early modern period in its global dimensions (and sometimes even earlier periods) invites us to go beyond the specific, and necessary, debates about what the Renaissance or the Enlightenment were for contemporaries, or maybe for us as critical scholars, and leads us to address also the question of legacies. One of my concerns at this moment is using these debates in cultural and intellectual history in order to interrogate more generally the notion of global early modernity. The challenge is to develop a less Eurocentric

perspective on a formative period of world historical significance, without losing sight of the fact that there are very specific European dynamics that define its uniqueness. These questions often lead us to very current issues, for example on the topic of what a less Eurocentric cosmopolitan set of moral and political values might look like.

Let me add that in my view *longue durée* cultural and intellectual history can only be undertaken without abandoning all the insights derived from rigorous contextualisation, in particular when we assess the contexts of production and reception for any document. This was at least my ambition when in *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance* I adopted a long chronology from the mid thirteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. I am therefore in full sympathy with David Armitage's notion of serial contextualism.

What did your work on the concepts of race, racism, and ethnic discrimination in the early modern context suggest to you, in relation to the historiographical problem of the connection between racism and Enlightenment theories of civilisation and stadial development?

As you will see in my essay provocatively titled 'Were Early Modern Europeans Racist?', as historians we need to decide what kind of understanding of race and racism will produce answers to specific questions, because we can adopt very broad definitions or very narrow ones, and all can be valid in the right context. My suggestion is that our task as historians is to introduce those distinctions that allow us to understand causality better, and from this perspective, what I have argued is that while the existence of racial distinctions based on lineage and phenotype, and even theories that support various forms of collective discrimination, is very general in human history, the existence of a *culturally dominant* racial discourse with scientific pretensions in Europe, one that encouraged large-scale racial discrimination in practice, is a product of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Enlightenment theories of the history of civilisation contributed to this development because they cemented a hierarchical principle in the classification of human cultures that, unlike the classical opposition of the barbarian and the civilised, was connected to an idea of gradual social, scientific and political progress. However, this does not by itself explain the shift to the kind of pseudo-scientific racial thought that argued that the progress of civilisation was, in reality, beyond certain racial groups, thus establishing a natural rather than simply historical hierarchy within mankind. We must also consider the new emphasis on physical taxonomies in natural history, and the crisis of the anthropological monogenism of the biblical tradition, all of which helped erode what I have described as the orthodox consensus represented, for example, by the count of Buffon, in which the variety of men displayed degrees of cultural sophistication, social organisation and power over nature, not natural levels of rationality or sociability. Of course, ideas do not evolve in a vacuum, the experiences of the Atlantic slave trade and new forms of global imperialism brought these threads together. The final point I would emphasise is that the Enlightenment was ideologically plural and also included the critique of racial discrimination.

Many of your past and current projects are comparative in nature, and encompass both the Americas and Asia. How do you place your work in relation to the vast and varied field of historiography that today goes by the name of global history? And in relation to *histoire croisée*?

I believe I already began to answer this question when we discussed logocentrism. As a historian of travel writing and cultural encounters, and their European impact, my main task has been to interrogate critically the European narrative of early modernity, and I have approached early modern globalization through a revisionist interpretation of some of the cultural dimensions of colonial and imperial history. *Histoire croisée* invites us to mobilise non-European sources wherever possible, and my next ambition is to develop more collaborative projects with experts in non-European languages in order to undertake a comparative history of early modernity with specific reference to those ethnographic and historiographical sources that have become the central focus of my research. I am also very interested in comparative projects that are not afraid to ask the big questions, such as for example Alan Strathern's recent work on the changing relationship between religion and politics with the world-wide expansion of transcendentalist religions. I believe that both the study of global connections and of global comparisons must be pursued in parallel, although they are not exactly the same. For example, in a future publication I argue that the Renaissance of global connections is more obvious, but also more Eurocentric, than the Renaissance of global comparisons (for the latter, consider the problems raised by the idea of 'many Renaissances' proposed by Jack Goody). My aim will be to assess critically these two possibilities.

Major digitisation initiatives have revitalised discussions on archives and libraries, on which voices are represented in them and which struggle to find expression. What impact does the archive as an ideologically oriented construct have on your research work? What impact, if any, has the increasing availability of digitised sources had? What methodological cautions would you recommend?

Archives may have been created with a particular purpose in mind, but we historians are eclectic opportunists with our own agendas, and any scrap of information may be valuable. The Jesuit archives in Rome are a good example of a well-organised and accessible collection of exceptional value that secular historians have been exploiting with remarkable success. Members of the Society of Jesus have not only been good record keepers, but also often exemplary editors, and I certainly could not have done much of my work with original documents on the early modern missions without all those resources in place. I have therefore enormous respect for Jesuit scholars of an older generation who published many of these documents, like Henry Hosten, Josef Wicki and Georg Schurhammer, even if my interpretative perspective may often differ from theirs. Having said this, the very existence of an exceptional archive may also create a distortion, and I have often observed that the history of the early modern Catholic missions in the Spanish and Portuguese imperial jurisdictions suffers from a 'Jesuit bias' with respect to other religious orders like the Franciscans, Augustinians

and Dominicans, simply because we have a much better archive. More generally, what all these archives offer is the European (and male) perspective on the missions, and we must often struggle to retrieve a native perspective, although thankfully in some cases this can be done (for example, with Chinese, Japanese and Mughal sources).

The digitisation of many collections of documents and rare books offers wider accessibility, which is of course a positive development, but whenever possible it should only be supplementary to personal contact with original documents, because as I already noted, the document is not only a text, but also an object that tells a particular story. Faster research does not mean better research, in fact the contrary is often the case, and our age is certainly displaying some of the symptoms of information overload, with a lot of repetition and redundancy. What seems crucial here is to value perspective over the mere circulation of information: the perspective that allows us to pose important questions self-critically, to assess the value of particular kinds of evidence, and to organise the information accordingly. It is also perspective that allows us to know how we stand in relation to a historiographical tradition. Of course, we can acquire this perspective with digitised sources, but the pressure to publish quickly prevalent in modern academia, combined with the ability to locate sources very quickly at the click of a button, often militates against it, especially because those sources not yet digitised may tell a different story. And when a particular document is already known, there could be different copies, so let us consider the importance of taking account of textual variants and marginalia.

Even when we are only considering the best, more critical examples of historical scholarship, there is another potential cost to the prevalence of digitisation, which is losing the magic of discovery through direct contact with the document as a unique object that has survived the ravages of time. Certainly, my happiest moments as a historian are associated to the contact with new primary sources in their original form, in the rare books library or in the archive. I have devoted some effort to the time consuming but also constructive task of publishing annotated editions and translations of a few documents of special value, often previously unknown, such as the Jesuit Antonio Rubino's account of the history and religion of Vijayanagara, the Florentine Gionvanni di Buonagrazia's letter about his participation in the second expedition of Vasco da Gama to India, the report of the embassy of Don García de Silva y Figueroa to Shah Abbas by his secretary Saulisante, or (at the very start of my career) various political proposals by Don Francisco Gilabert.

In your work you have dealt with a number of themes and topics in religious history - from religious missions as settings of cross-cultural encounters, to accommodation and comparative methods to be found in authors such as Lafitau. You have also reflected on the role of the Jesuits in the Enlightenment republic of letters. Are you developing any new projects in the area of missionary ethnography? And have you noticed any changes or novelties in the field of Jesuit studies in recent years?

I am hoping to complete soon a long overdue book on missionaries as ethnographers, based on some of the materials I have been working on over the last fifteen years. Let me add that, in my experience, religious history – which in my case has primarily focused on the history of religious missions, with special attention to reinterpreting the concept of religious dialogue – is central to cultural history for much of human history. It is, for the period I have studied, unavoidable. However, for the same reason, it does not constitute a separate realm of history, but rather belongs to the history of subjectivity in its many facets, involving beliefs, ideas, politics, and social practices. It should therefore be considered as an integral part of the kind of history of cultural encounters and their intellectual impact that I have sought to pursue. In turn, historians of encounters (not unlike cultural historians more generally) can contribute to historicising and re-conceptualising what the category of ‘religion’ actually means. This may sound unexceptional nowadays, but not so long ago the history of the early modern missions was primarily cultivated by members of the same religious orders that constituted the main object of study, notably in the case of the Jesuits, who still today have exceptional historians like Nicolas Standaert. In fact, not everybody is comfortable with historicising religious identities. Back in the early 1990s a famous historian at the European University Institute, upon hearing a preliminary version of what would become my first article on the Jesuit method of accommodation, ‘Defining Cultural Dialogue’, suggested to me in private that secular historians should stay away from religion. I did not of course follow this particular piece of advice.

Have you ever felt that chance or serendipity played a central role in your research? If so, is there any episode you would like to recount?

Perhaps I will simply say that physical environments very often help shape research. Jaś Elsner and I shared a house during the second year of my PhD, and we used to sit at the breakfast table and have extremely stimulating conversations about the nature of historical knowledge (we also talked about more fun things, not to be repeated here). Jamie Masters, another gifted classicist, also came to live with us, and it was for that reason that I ended up writing an article on the rhetorical construction of the figure of emperor Nero in Tacitus and in Tacitism for a pathbreaking book they were then editing (the subject of what may lie behind the myth of Nero as the archetypical tyrant is now, thirty years later, the focus of an exhibition at the British Museum). The University Library at Cambridge University, which over the years has remained one of my most fundamental resources, still has the wonderful capacity to let us browse open shelves organised thematically and discover things by chance, and the same can be said of the Library of the Warburg Institute in London, another institution to which I owe a great deal. I am less enthusiastic about increasing reliance on digitalized resources, although I must admit that they are very helpful when one lacks such excellent libraries and archives nearby, and that the world wide web has allowed us to continue working during the covid crisis.

What audience do you think of when you write about history? Is there any reflection you would like to share about the role of historical research and communication in

today's society? And is there any particular suggestion you would give in this regard to a historian at the beginning of his or her career?

The question of who our audience is a great one. I write of course for anyone interested, to begin the community of fellow historians (broadly understood across various disciplines), which I like to conceive of as the modern continuation of the early modern Republic of Letters, cosmopolitan, transnational and open to all who care. I try to write without assuming a large amount of previous knowledge, but without simplifications, and although I expect my published work to be understood by any student of history at the university level, I also suspect that many non-specialists might struggle with some of my writing, because the kind of questions that I pose are by definition rather specialised. Some pieces, like a short contribution to a 'handbook' or a 'companion' volume, are meant to be introductory, and I have done quite a few of these, but journal articles (or chapters in collective books) and monographs should aspire to push the boundaries of existing knowledge with new thinking (I fear that nowadays a lot is being published that surprises me for its relative lack of novelty and ignorance of previous work on the subject – partly the result of an exaggerated emphasis on publishing quickly in modern academia). Still, specialism should not become elitism. I believe that, as a community of historians, we should speak to society and avoid creating an ivory tower reserved for the elect, or indulge in a jargon that only the initiate can understand. In part this is a civic responsibility, because historical narratives matter to modern identities, but they can also be manipulated politically (and not just by politicians) with frightening ease. This danger is unavoidable, so we must sometimes be prepared to enter the fray. Hopefully, what I write will contribute to perfecting and empowering cross-cultural and cosmopolitan principles rather than narrow nationalist or religious agendas. In any case, we all need to learn how to address different audiences – personally I tend to reserve my more accessible mode for oral delivery. However, let me emphasise again that our task as scholars is to elevate public discourse through reasoned learning, not to erode the quality of historical analysis in order to reach a broader public. My aim as a professional historian is not to entertain, but rather to frame historical questions from my own original perspective, and to enhance our historical understanding of those questions through my research and writing. It is a long-term project whose impact is often slow, but which is perfectly compatible with the existence of other professionals who may devote themselves to making history available to a wider public (this includes of course fiction, TV and film – another minefield of potential manipulation).

What is your personal idea of the historian's craft? Working on early-modern sources, what specific skills did you need and challenges did you face? What do you think is the (desirable) role of linguistic knowledge and the use of translations in accessing primary sources? What would you recommend a young historian to pay special attention to in his or her training?

Behind history as I understand it lies a romantic impulse to think about humanity by crossing time, and often space too. This may bring us to understanding the

origins of where we are now historically, but also, more generally, to thinking about what we are anthropologically. The deepest challenge is to interpret the motivations of people culturally distant from us, not only with different technologies and information at their disposal, but also with different cultural values (taking account that cultural distances are of course relative). So your question brings us back to the beginning of this interview, to the project of writing a history of perceptions that is sensitive to the existence of such cultural differences, without giving up entirely the belief in our capacity to understand people from the past (this, in turn, requires the idea of a common nature and even a common rationality, however broadly defined). We approach this task by learning the languages of our primary documents to begin with, whenever we can, but this is only the starting point, because beliefs and cultural practices encompass something much broader than mere linguistic competence (this is why I have sometimes written about language-games instead, in order to capture the wider set of social, literary and artistic conventions that condition any act of communication). If our main subject as historians is interpreting the agency of culturally distant human beings, we must do so by acquiring the tools that will allow us to find an adequate midpoint between sympathy and scepticism. In order to achieve this, the imagination is the most powerful, but also the most dangerous, faculty of the historian. It allows us to acquire a perspective and create order out of the chaos of irregular, partial, and fragmentary information, but can also lead us to fall prey to our own interpretative prejudices, in particular to confirmation bias. I therefore understand the practice of history as an exercise in disciplining the imagination: by contrasting information, by considering different perspectives, by not assuming that you know what people from the past were thinking about only because they acted in certain ways, and of course by looking for alternative sources of evidence.

You kindly invite me to offer advice to young scholars. Many historical questions of an empirical nature only require clarifying individual agency and circumstance, but when it comes to interpreting historical causality in relation to complex cultural phenomena, especially in the *longue durée*, I advise looking for connections at different scales. It is also important to bear in mind that everything (including something as potentially abstract as intellectual life) has a local dimension, and in this respect reconstructing the relevant local contexts matters as much as delineating the general trends. When it comes to political analysis, early modernists (and probably historians of later periods too) should avoid focusing on the nation state as the only or most natural unit of political and cultural analysis. This does not mean that the state is irrelevant, far from it, but in an age of dynastic composite states, colonial empires, and fragmented jurisdictions, its nature is often complex, and national identities are seldom homogeneous. Last but not least, the historian must always cultivate writing skills (and rhetorical skills more generally, because oral delivery also matters to us). Personally I look for clarity, precision and conciseness, albeit appreciating that what works best in English is often a little different to what works in Spanish, Catalan or Italian. When it comes to our writing

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and other linguistic skills, we must all keep working at improving and never assuming that we already know enough – but I guess this is true of everything we do.