

An Interview with Martin Mulso

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Martin Mulso is an intellectual and cultural historian whose research has scoured the early modern period for those zones of nonalignment characterised by political dissidence, religious heterodoxy, and learned eccentricity. His work thereby intimates an alternative genealogy of modernity by suggesting unexpected lineages that traverse the political underground, the social margins, and the academic periphery. After an American sojourn as the Professor of History at Rutgers University in the mid-2000s, Mulso returned to Germany in 2008 to take up the dual position of Professor for Cultures of Knowledge in Modern Europe at the University of Erfurt and of Director of the Gotha Research Centre. Drawing inspiration from the collections preserved in the famed ducal library in Gotha, he has continued his explorations of the more obscure corners of intellectual and cultural history by shedding light on the early modern fascination with the orient, the counter-‘public sphere’ of Enlightenment secret societies, the clandestine publication of pornography, and the erudite enthusiasm for numismatics. Like his work more generally, these investigations stimulate broad reflections upon how the margins and the mainstream, materiality and media, and modernity and the early modern relate to each other.

It would be conceivable in an interview such as this one to limit the exchange to the themes that dominate your research and the methodologies that you thereby apply. However, my hope is to complement the Fachgespräch with questions motivated by an interest in your own intellectual biography—and I believe that there is no need for any embarrassment on my part if my questions touch upon your family background, career path, and intellectual friendships as such an inquiry mirrors the contextualisation that you seek to achieve in your own historical exhumations of those eccentric and non-conformist early modern scholars for whom you clearly feel a large degree of sympathy. Yet as a point of departure, I wanted to begin by touching upon the more theoretical ideas underpinning your work. In the course of reacquainting myself with your work over the last weeks, I made a list of the following figures and their corresponding approaches because it was evident to me that they recur throughout your writings: (i) Carlo Ginzburg and the insights of microhistory, (ii) Dieter Henrich and the idea of a constellation, (iii) Ian Hunter and the notion of a persona, (iv) the Cambridge School and its contextualism. Can you elaborate upon what they mean

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to your research? And are there other ideas that I've missed but that deserve to be mentioned?

The path of my thinking leads from more systematic philosophy through the history of philosophy to a very broadly conceived history of ideas or knowledge—in the past one would have said *Geistesgeschichte*. It has been a relatively long path, with a lot of twists and turns; if I were to talk about all the sources of inspiration and instruction that have pushed me down this path and determined its direction, we would end up with a story in which actual encounters with my direct academic teachers would give way to encounters with books whose authors then, in a later phase, gradually became my acquaintances and friends. It starts with Ernst Tugendhat, for whom I exchanged Tübingen for Berlin as the place of study because I admired the seriousness and uncompromising nature evident in his philosophical search and in his turn to analytical philosophy; in Berlin I was also fascinated by Michael Theunissen, a completely different thinker whose thinking intimated the wide, mostly unarticulated perspectives that could encompass the philosophies of Hegel and Kierkegaard, and Freud and Marx. I wrote my seminar papers with them. When I was in Munich, I primarily wanted to hear Dieter Henrich as a theorist of self-consciousness and an interpreter of Hegel; the appeal of his ideas about constellations as small, incredibly productive philosophical networks only dawned on me very slowly, at a time many years later when I was already more of a historian. This process arose out of observing as an outside onlooker his Jena project, in which constellation research was developed and applied. But in Munich, in a manner completely at odds with my own plans, I suddenly fell under the spell of the Renaissance. In its roster of professors, Munich had strengths in the intellectual history of the Renaissance. I found myself drawn to these professors for a number of reasons: I was enthusiastic about painters like Leonardo and Botticelli; I sympathised with the spirit of optimism of early humanism from reading Cassirer; and I also harboured the hope of discovering the prehistory of German idealism in the writings of Nicholas of Cusa and Campanella. There, at the Renaissance Institute, I became absorbed with the work on a dissertation devoted to the natural philosophy of the Renaissance; although it was submitted to Henrich, it was in fact inspired by Stephan Otto and Eckhard Keßler, the professors at the Renaissance Institute. At that time, I was increasingly influenced by the Italian style of research, such as that practiced by Cesare Vasoli, the great scholar with whom I was able to exchange ideas during my months in Florence. This style is characterised by many footnotes, exhibits a high degree of philological precision, and cultivates a different view of the genesis of modernity by tracing a path leading from humanism and heterodox Aristotelianism via the naturalism of the libertines to the Enlightenment. It was only thanks to this perspective that I was able to discover my later themes.

However, my indirect teachers were no less important, especially in the late phase of my doctorate and then in the post-doc period. It was the books by Robert Darnton and

Peter Burke, by Anthony Grafton and Carlo Ginzburg, and later also by Jan Assmann, which shaped my own way of researching and writing—all historians whom I only got to know later and who have all become friends. You are right to mention Ginzburg's microhistory and Henrich's constellation research, but they are embedded in the other influences I mentioned. The Cambridge School, on the other hand, was something I noticed only marginally and relatively late, even though I clearly remember my visit to John Pocock in Baltimore. I really appreciate Ian Hunter and his group of Australian colleagues; they always come with great suggestions of which the theorisation of the philosophical persona is just one of many.

What I would also like to mention is my 'training' in sociology, which took place during my *habilitation*. Ulrich Beck was appointed to his chair at Munich in 1992, and I attended his seminars from the beginning and learned a tremendous amount there. His ideas about the reflexivity of today's 'second' modernity, about the risk society and the change in our descriptive categories still intrigue me and influence my own thinking. Beck wanted to make me his assistant, but I had to decline because I was in the final stages of writing my *habilitation*. I miss him—he died unexpectedly at the beginning of 2015—and regret that I can no longer talk to him about the current world situation and how best to understand it.

In his book History: Its Purpose and Method (1950) the Dutch historian Gustaaf Renier suggested that historians should reframe their understanding of their work and what mediates their relationship to the past by recognising how it is more appropriate to speak of traces rather than sources. Reading your work, I was recently struck by how much of it is devoted to reconstructing the past from 'traces' (indeed, you often use this very word). If we play through the possibilities with your topic of choice, namely the Radical Enlightenment, then we are presented with two alternatives, first: 'What are the sources of the Radical Enlightenment?' and second: 'What are the traces left behind by the Radical Enlightenment?' It seems to me that by asking the first question one ends up with something similar to Jonathan Israel's project, which tends to identify an ultimate source and point of origin (Spinoza!) and which remains focused on ideas conveyed and carried by text, in part because, in keeping with the notion of 'sources,' texts seem to 'flow.' If, alternatively, one asks: 'What are the traces of the Radical Enlightenment?' then the result is something approximating far more closely the kind of history that you have attempted: less unitary, more episodic, and dependent on nuanced, fine-grained detective work. Might this be one way to characterise your research and its relationship to the intellectual projects of others such as Israel?

It's true that whenever and wherever I discover traces, I am seized by an urge to comprehend the entirety that once existed and now has been lost. Unwritten books of which only the table of contents exists, suppressed writings, theorists who died young

before they could fully develop their intellectual programs—all of this clearly triggers a reflex in me to engage with this kind of material or these kinds of people. This may have something to do with the fact that I have a very vivid historical imagination, but it also originates in my appreciation for detective work, which uses a wide variety of clues to piece together a story as it happened (even though I don't read detective novels myself). I don't have to mention how Carlo Ginzburg has emphasised the concept of traces in his microhistory, which I admire. To this day I am also colossally impressed by what Robert Darnton demonstrated in his book *The Business of Enlightenment*, where he was able to infer the name and history of the printer's assistant who accidentally left a fingerprint on a copy of the *Encyclopédie*, and, more broadly, to reconstruct from letters and invoices the conversations that took place in the back rooms of the Société typographique de Neuchatel, the publishing house which printed the work.

You are absolutely right in identifying in the evidence left behind by the Radical Enlightenment the historical traces that have captivated me for a long time. When I first became acquainted with the field of clandestine literature and those researchers devoted to its excavation—this was at a four-week, intensive seminar that Richard Popkin organised in Leiden in the spring of 1990 and that focused on the famous *Treatise of the Three Impostors*—I noticed that, apart from Winfried Schröder's important dissertation, there was almost no research on the German aspect of this story. I had stumbled upon an almost entirely uncultivated section of this field. So many figures whose lives had played out beyond the semi-familiar Halle Early Enlightenment around Christian Thomasius also remained veiled in obscurity. I thus have devoted much time in the subsequent decades to rescuing these figures from this obscurity and presenting the results in many books, essays and anthologies. This work has been very exciting. It never occurred to me to want to reduce everything to a single denominator. I believe that reconstructing certain trends, patterns, preferences, and central episodes corresponds to the highest level of abstraction that can be reached. Going beyond that would be pointless and would unnecessarily reduce the diversity of the era.

One more point about traces. As you've noted, the term imparts a sense of what has been lost, of incompleteness and therefore of what has to be inferred from the evidence we are able to recover. It is clearly necessary for historians to develop a sense for the way we can be tempted into a lop-sided or distorted picture of the past by what is bequeathed to us as evidential traces. An obvious and, for intellectual historians, fundamental example of such a bias can be identified in the fact that much thinking occurs socially through conversations and discussions—yet, with exceptions created by the somewhat artificial situation in which someone records a conversation, this thinking leaves no direct traces (in contrast to the thinking that unfolds and then is conserved by writing books and texts). As I understand it, the idea of the intellectual constellation is very attuned to how

thinking as a whole depends largely on human interaction that most often leaves behind no direct evidence and whose effects therefore have to be inferred. (Clearly letters and correspondence are the mode of writing that comes closest to capturing this dialogic, social dimension of thought.) But it's not just the mode of communication that (pre-)structures the kinds of traces left to us, but also what is communicated. I wonder whether that is one message of your Prekäres Wissen, which has recently been translated into English and published by Princeton University Press as Knowledge Lost: A New View of Early Modern Intellectual History; namely, that the knowledge associated with the Radical Enlightenment was endangered from the outset in a way not true of more orthodox knowledge. Are we liable to underestimate the impact of the Radical Enlightenment because the knowledge into which it was 'encoded' was more precarious and less likely to survive?

I am interested in what has been lost, but even more interested in the strategies and tactics that have been devised to save thoughts from such a fate and that offer these thoughts some prospect of survival even when thinkers find themselves in a difficult position and their thoughts are not welcome in society. This is the double meaning of my concept of 'precarious knowledge': it comprehends both the state of being endangered and the effort to avert the danger and secure what is endangered for the future. Incidentally, the concept of 'precariousness' was introduced to me through a conference in Konstanz, which was about 'figures of precariousness,' inspired by the debates about precarious working relationships. I then experimentally applied this to my figures from the clandestine underground and gradually understood how well the sociological-economic notion of a 'clandestine precariat' fits the Radical Enlightenment.

This approach induces a shift in the traditional perspective on Radical Enlightenment, which is based more on content-related, doxographic categories. By contrast, the approach I've tried to develop zeroes in on the dangerous situations, practices of dealing with them, and generally the materiality of what has been handed down. It even moves a little away from the focus solely on radical thinkers; rather, you suddenly see these thinkers in their parallelism with and their (by no means always intentional) proximity to spies, alchemists, black marketeers—all types who cannot simply go public with their knowledge and have to hide from law enforcement. This proximity raises completely new questions.

Your observation that thinking is mostly based on the interaction between people contains a deep truth. Thinking is indeed embedded in emotions, attitudes, intentions—and various forms of communication. Not taking this into account—this belief connects me with the Cambridge School—would mean an enormous reduction and distortion of what communication intends to convey. But reconstructing the original speech situations is not easy. Faced with this challenge, one is grateful for any guidance supplied by

linguistics, anthropology, or the sociology of knowledge. Searching in this way for the epistemic situations in which Radical Enlightenment emerged, one actually arrives at results that are characterised by precarity and fragility. One realises that it is only possible to reconstruct miniscule parts of what was once there. This does not have to entail an untenable inflation in the impact attributed to the radical fringe of the Enlightenment. But you do begin to grasp how this fringe, even if it was a fringe, possessed a philosophical importance and a historical significance of which some contemporary mainstream figures were doubtless aware—even if the voice of prudence advised them to keep schtum and avoid discussion of it.

There is a natural tendency to treat the Radical Enlightenment as some kind of historical entity that set itself apart from a moderate, mainstream form of the Enlightenment, which itself was distinct from a conservative orthodoxy. In fact, one might be inclined to speak of intellectual currents, although I wonder to what degree the notion of an intellectual current belongs to the same conceptual and metaphorical scheme as the notion of historical sources. Be that as it may, you're clearly careful about hypostatising the notion of the Radical Enlightenment; if in this differentiation between moderate and radical we pluralise the notion of Enlightenment, your writings almost seem to recommend a further pluralisation—and perhaps even fragmentation—when it comes to the Radical Enlightenment. I imagine that you are also careful about using this term to categorise and pigeon-hole historical figures, given your alertness to role-playing, intellectual experimentation, and persona-splitting. In other words, it's not as if there was some merry band of committed, self-identifying radical Enlighteners destabilising the old order from the underground. Can you say a few words about the status of the Radical Enlightenment, also as it relates to individual thinkers?

How isolated radical thinkers were around 1700, how little they were personally connected to their like-minded contemporaries and kindred spirits and how difficult it was for them to talk to others about their heterodox ideas—all of this became clear to me when chance pieces of evidence enabled me to imagine the situation in which such thinkers often found themselves; an opinion expressed too freely exposes them to a genuine risk, and although it was possible under certain conditions to obtain forbidden writings from others, these writings were anonymous or pseudonymous and withheld any direct information about the identity and location of the author. I realised that in every radical's head there was a mental map made up of the many small territories where one could expect some higher degree of toleration and where one even might be able to secretly print one's own writings—and that this map extended even further to include more distant destinations if one had to emigrate completely—as was the case with Christian Gottlieb Prieber, who ended up living among the Cherokee Indians or Johann Friedrich Bachstrom, who found refuge for some time in Istanbul. So you are right when you say that it is rather misleading

to talk about currents here. Radical Enlightenment is more fragmented than you think; almost every case has its own individual conditions of emergence.

By the way, the publisher suggested the subtitle *Zweifler und Verzweifelte um 1700 (The Sceptical and the Desperate around 1700)* for my new book *Aufklärungs-Dinge (Enlightenment Things)*, which I was happy to adopt. It's not always about radicals in the classic sense, but rather about those figures who were irritated by the difference between reality and appearances in this era and by all the change that this era forced upon them. Such experiences might have unfolded in the attempt to navigate the entirely new market for journals and magazines, to chart a path in court society, or to find sure ground in interpreting the Bible. Here again, I'm interested in how people reacted to the irritations, and, using frontispieces and the title pages of books and journals, I'm trying to understand how they made sense of the world and their historical situation.

Lately I've taken to referring to the small groups of those who shared an affinity for radicalism—groups that emerged in the form of student associations or circles of friends—as 'resonance relationships.' Anyone who has different, unusual opinions is looking for resonance, for a reaction to the feelings and ideas that they would otherwise always have to deny to the outside world. I also try to use this terminology to describe later social movements such as the Illuminati.

And maybe I can mention another concept that I'm currently trying to develop. One can ask how a radical idea that only found rare and isolated expression in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century could participate in something like a 'circulation' of ideas. To do this, I use the idea of the food chain, or even better: the food web. The transmission of radical writings is not linear, running directly as a vector from free spirit to free spirit. Instead, the situation is far more complicated; for example, an orthodox collector acquires such manuscripts in order to get to know the 'enemy' better or because of an attraction to manuscripts whose value is enhanced by their extreme rarity; the collection then ends up in other hands or is visited by students who secretly copy the blasphemous texts because they fall for the allure of what is forbidden—until finally a copy falls into the hands of a kindred free spirit and spurs him or her on to develop daring new thoughts.

In considering your own network, one can add to the name of Jonathan Israel a long list of other colleagues who count as intellectual comrades—Tony Grafton, Winfried Schröder, etc. I suspect that the field of early modern history was where your paths first crossed. I'm interested in knowing more about how you arrived at this field in the first place. Who was it that stoked your interest and pushed you in this direction in the first place? And without wanting to pre-empt your answer, I'd like to hear more about a figure who has interested me and whom you've already mentioned, namely Richard Popkin. Recently I was going through the Finding Aid

for his papers, now preserved at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in California, when I came across your name. Can you talk more about the role he played in your intellectual journey?

Research on the early modern period, when I came across it through my interest in the Renaissance in the years around 1990, had arrived at a particular juncture. By the late 1970s and 1980s, the previous generation represented by Klaus Garber, Wilhelm Kühlmann, Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann and others had laid solid foundations for German research into this period. The history of philosophy and literature in the early modern period had become a terrain that, with its baroque scholarship, its late humanistic Latinity, and its now-forgotten genres, contained a huge amount of previously unknown material whose individual items could now be more accurately and fully contextualised. I spent almost every day of the 1990s in the Bavarian State Library in Munich and immersed myself in these unknown worlds. The exchange with like-minded friends such as Helmut Zedelmaier and Ralph Häfner, with whom I had formed a discussion group, was very important back then.

At the same time, I read books, often from Anglophone countries, but also by French or Italian historians, that applied anthropological or sociological terminology to early modern sources in an exciting way. I have already mentioned Robert Darnton, who was inspired by Clifford Geertz. Peter Burke was particularly fascinating for me in this respect because he made a whole wealth of theoretical elements—also from linguistics—available for early modern historians in a manner that was both original and respectful of the source material. Such elegance was not something I derived from German authors. I modelled my own work on this scholarship by non-German historians and tried to combine their style with the sophistication of German scholarship and the rigor of Italian historiography, as evident from their elaborate footnotes. I was also helped by Anthony Grafton's books, which demonstrated this sort of graceful scholarship in a dizzyingly perfect way. It was all just a matter of not being afraid: not being afraid of the mountain of difficult-to-read Latin-language sources and not being afraid of the intimidating perfection of the models. What helped me was the fact that the German-speaking world around 1700 was so rich that I was able to try out the desired syntheses of theory and source work in my own way to my heart's content. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in my book *Die unanständige Gelehrtenrepublik (The Indecent Republic of Letters)*.

By the way, the books of my intellectual heroes—Darnton or Burke, Grafton or Ginzburg or Chartier—were all published by the Wagenbach Verlag, mostly in the series known as the 'Small Cultural Studies Library.' In this respect, I am a child of the Wagenbach-culture—something I once told the publisher Klaus Wagenbach. I am proud that I am now publishing with the Wagenbach Verlag and, in doing so, following in the footsteps of my role models.

You mention Richard Popkin. I have already referred to his Leiden seminar, which marked a crucial moment in my intellectual development. I always viewed my essay on Peter Friedrich Arpe, an avid, early eighteenth-century collector of condemned theological works, at the time as my 'journeyman's piece.' But what I also experienced for the first time with Popkin is real scholarly generosity. This had never happened to me in my inner academic world: that someone would freely share the treasures of their own knowledge and put you in touch with a whole bunch of colleagues who could help you work on a topic. That was a formative experience. And to see how Popkin himself had the gift of rediscovering attitudes and connections that no one before him had noticed, that had been completely forgotten, was also incredibly impressive. It's easy to follow the beaten path; Popkin showed me how gratifying it could be to deviate from it.

Your research ranges across time from the Renaissance to the Late Enlightenment. Thus, you feel intellectually at home in the early modern. Are you in a position to say what qualities this period possesses that speak to you? Is it because research into this period occurs on the basis of an inheritance of materials that encourages or allows approaches that cannot be applied so easily in earlier or later periods? Every period can stake some claim to being decisive historically, but are there aspects of the early modern that, at least for you, made the historical investigation of it appear more urgent?

I think that the early modern period stands in an interesting intermediate position. It is still full of strangeness compared to our modernity—and that is what particularly appealed to me; I tend to find everything overly close and familiar to us uninteresting—but on the other hand, the early modern is close enough to modernity to still be relevant to the features and achievements of the society we inhabit. My contact with Ulrich Beck, but also with Winfried Schulze, gave me the courage to occasionally draw these connections—although still too rarely and usually very hesitantly.

I have already mentioned that my immersion in the world of books from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries took place in a manner oblivious to disciplinary boundaries. As a philosopher, you are actually trained to only take 'pure' theory seriously and to concentrate on the 'big' ideas. Everything else is ignored as irrelevant. I consciously strove to rid myself of this constraint; doing so felt like a liberation, and the reward was that I was suddenly faced with an overwhelming wealth of sources and topics. That's still how I see it today. Carlo Ginzburg once said in an interview that for him researching a completely new and unknown field was akin to skiing in fresh snow. I'm not a skier, but I can completely comprehend this feeling. That's how I feel too. In the last fifteen years, inspired by the holdings of the Gotha Library and the Gotha Archives, I have delved into the areas of oriental studies, alchemy, and numismatics. These are all specialised disciplines in which I cannot ever hope to become a real expert. But if you have acquired certain basic knowledge, if you know colleagues and friends whom you can impose upon and annoy

with questions, and if you have grasped the way in which researchers think through these fields, then you can achieve a lot—especially by importing trends and insights into these disciplines that are not known or common there. Thus, in my new book *Fremdprägung. Münzwissen in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (*Foreign Coinage. Numismatics in Times of Globalization*) I have tried to introduce the ideas of global and entangled history into numismatics—an undertaking which will hopefully generate some excitement and prompt some rethinking in this field. I really enjoy doing something like that. In the history of alchemy, I am attempting something similar.

In all of this I feel a kinship with Jan Assmann. He comes from the opposite direction, so to speak—from research on Egyptian antiquity—and has given us early moderns a whole range of new insights about ‘our’ specific period by going beyond the boundaries of his discipline, by tracing the lines extending from antiquity into the seventeenth or eighteenth century, and by thus properly illuminating the knowledge that we have been dealing with. His way of writing—focused and factual yet also autonomous; conscious of theory yet also jargon-free and understandable—remains an aspirational ideal for me. And without the distant perspective from antiquity, I think the understanding of modern times remains shallow.

When it comes to your upbringing and your socialisation into an academic historian, I am curious to know when it was that you first discovered your passion for history in general and for early modern intellectual history in particular? Was the Mulsow household like one of those early modern scholarly dynasties in which learning was part of the air you breathed? Or was some kind of journey necessary and perhaps even an act of defiance in which you overcame an original estrangement to ‘book learning’?

The ‘Mulsow household’ was not one heavy with the smell of books or learning. Rather, it was the other way around: the unknown world of literature and philosophy was what brought me out of that household. Petrarch with his Greek books, which he adored but could not read, has always been emblematic for me. As already mentioned, the journey was not initially heading towards history as its destination; rather, at first it pointed in the direction of philosophy and literature. The idea of becoming a writer wasn’t far from my mind either. The magic that comes from old, original books took hold of me in my sixth or seventh semester. At that time, the muse of history gave me an unexpected nudge when my eyes were suddenly opened to the greatness of highly learned works like Ernst Robert Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. A little later I bought my first old book, a collection of exempla by a Jesuit from 1650, in a Berlin antiquarian bookstore on Potsdamer Strasse. What fascinated me even more than the content (which was barely accessible to me at the time because it was in Latin) was the pigskin-leather binding, which was drawn over wood and which bore the traces of fire and water, of distant wars and catastrophes. Books carry their history with them.

By the time I had finished my master's thesis (on Leibniz's philosophy of language and Hegel's conceptual logic), I had reached the point where I no longer wanted to struggle with the thankless task of building a bridge between Hegel's system and analytic philosophy. (At this time, Robert Brandom was yet to develop his philosophy; perhaps if his works had then been available, I would have persisted and pursued a different kind of academic career.) As a result, I was open to history, initially in the form of the 'prehistory' of German idealism, but that soon took on a life of its own. A key moment for me was the late phase of my work on my doctorate on Telesio's natural philosophy. In Rome, I discovered the manuscripts of Telesio's student Antonio Persio—hundreds of unedited and practically unknown pages. That's when it struck me for the first time: the urge to do belated justice to something that had been overlooked, lost, and whose original ambition had never been realised. But I couldn't really appreciate what it meant to edit and annotate a huge work like Persio's *De natura ignis et caloris*. I wanted to do that at first, but then I realised that I would have completely overextended myself. Nevertheless, I suddenly understood how research could generate interesting topics for further research.

Only then did my 'Wagenbach'-education in the cultural history of the early modern period slowly begin, accompanied by my years in the senior seminar of Winfried Schulze, who taught history in Munich at the time and gathered an interesting and lively circle of young historians around him. Before that moment, I had never studied history; now I was able to throw myself with enthusiasm into this field, while catching up on everything that I had missed until then.

I wanted to touch upon the affinity you feel towards the themes and figures that feature prominently in your scholarship. Something that has always interested me is the relationship between the individual personalities of scholars and the scholarship to which they devote themselves. In some cases, this relationship can be quite impersonal, as when for example the Doktorvater prescribes to the student the topic for a dissertation. In other cases, one encounters deep personal investment; the connection for the researchers is almost emotional or perhaps even grows out of his or her faith. Both scenarios entail certain risks, but clearly this second scenario characterises your own relationship to research—indeed, it is not possible to produce books that are as stimulating and engrossing as yours if your attitude is one of relative indifference towards the subject matter. Which brings me to the affinities between your own situation and many of the protagonists of your research. Thus, to cite one example, I often think there is something very eclectic about your own approach that seems to chime with the eclecticism of the early modern philosophers that interest you. Furthermore, a period of academic Wanderschaft was necessary because the German university scene was not immediately accommodating to a Philosophiehistoriker. Clearly, the excitement and passion about knowledge and learning is something you can also sympathise

with, but the precariousness of their existence was not entirely unknown to you. To finish on a personal note, I recall the conference on ‘Wilde Geschichten’ that you organised shortly after your arrival at Schloss Friedenstein in Gotha, where you took up the position of director of the Research Centre. Looking around the room on that occasion, I was struck by how the scholars assembled in the room resembled in some ways the protagonists of the stories they told. Can you say something more about these affinities to the figures that inspire your research and that inhabit your books?

I recently gave a lecture on exactly this topic because it interests me too. Why do you feel an affinity for certain people or topics, what makes you stick with them for a long time? I think this is also an interesting—in a sense psycho-historical—question for my protagonists three or four hundred years ago. But as far as I’m concerned, I don’t want to psychologise too much. Your observations are certainly correct: there are certain affinities of mine with the eclectic (in the methodological), with the unsteadiness of constantly being on the move, with the precarious status of one’s own academic existence. On the other hand, one could also say that I come from a secure middle-class background anchored in a stable political order, so it is precisely the chance offered by my historical research to step outside this zone of bourgeois comfort that has appealed to me and continues to do so. You rightly mentioned the conference at which I asked the participants to tell the wildest stories possible. Perhaps that corresponds to a methodological precept: it is precisely the extreme points, the most reviled books, the cruellest of fates, the craziest characters that reveal the most about the society. Such characters tend to expose the sensitivities, the hidden chasms, the peculiarities of the social world they inhabit (at least for as long as that social world tolerates them). And there is a not unimportant side-benefit for the historian who chooses to piece together these stories, namely that these stories engage us because of their drama and their danger.

*I mentioned in passing the years spent outside of Germany, particularly in the United States, where you held a chair at Rutgers. This experience, combined with your familiarity with scholarship from elsewhere, has undoubtedly given you a sense for the different academic cultures, each with their distinctive virtues and vices, pros and cons. Can you say anything about this and how it has enriched your own research? And to what degree does it inform your latest work *Überreichweiten: Perspektiven einer globalen Ideengeschichte*?*

Yes, you are absolutely right; my experiences in America have certainly opened new perspectives. I was already familiar with the American form of humanities and always appreciated it, especially the way American scholars made their scholarship generally accessible in the form of well-written and exciting texts. But what has probably had the most lasting influence on me is the shift in perspective away from Eurocentricity. My seminars at Rutgers involved participants from different cultures and continents. I also

spent a lot of time in Princeton at the Institute for Advanced Study, where I had already spent a year in 2002/2003. There I became increasingly fascinated by research into late antiquity and Islam, and I developed such close contact with the late Patricia Crone, the Islamic scholar, that my new book *Überreichweiten. Perspektiven einer globalen Ideengeschichte* (*Overlapping Interferences* [Martin acknowledges that finding the right translation is tricky]: *Perspectives on a Global History of Ideas*) is dedicated to her memory. At that time, together with Jonathan Israel, we were concerned with the question of whether there were paths of transmission for the ideas of early Islamic materialists and free thinkers that extended into the Europe of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in other words into the time of the Radical Enlightenment. This experience of posing questions whose scope spans millennia and many different cultures was completely new to me. Back then, I had long conversations with the Iranian and Islamic scholar Kevin van Bladel in order to become acquainted with perspectives from the other side and to lay the foundations for more precise inquiries. All of these reflections from fifteen years ago have been incorporated into my book, enriched with other detective-work within the context of the cultures of India, Indonesia, China, Africa and Latin America. I am firmly convinced that the history of ideas in the twenty-first century can no longer retain its Eurocentrism, just as I am also convinced that we must increasingly modify our view of modern Europe in the light of the climate crisis and the transformed temporalities that it imposes on us.