

An Interview with Charles Zika

by DANIEL BARBU

Charles Zika is a Professorial Fellow in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, and a Chief Investigator in the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, at the University of Melbourne. His research interests lie in the intersection of religion, magic, visual culture and emotion in German-speaking Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries, and at present focus on sacred place and pilgrimage, natural disasters and witchcraft. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and has held visiting fellowships at the Lichtenberg Kolleg, Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Göttingen, the Centre for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, and Centre for Early Modern European Culture, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbuettel. He is an editor of the Brepols series, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, and sits on various advisory and editorial boards, such as for *Cromohs* and *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*. His main publications include: *Johannes Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition der Renaissance* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1998); *Exorcising our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003); *The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London: Routledge, 2007). He has also co-edited three catalogues for art exhibitions in which he has been involved. He has recently edited (with Jennifer Spinks) *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

How would you define yourself and your work as an historian – or rather, as a cultural historian?

Well it's a very simple question, but it's also very complex – why we do anything at all. In terms of how I define myself, I see myself as a scholar... There's a sense in which I am interested in the world around me and interrogating it in various ways and trying to understand it. But I do so very much as an historian, that is, looking at past worlds and at the ways in which change occurs in those past worlds, looking at how people understand what is happening around them, and how these things change over time. That's something that I've always been fascinated by – even

as a child. Maybe part of that can be linked to my own child migrant experience, with my family coming from societies I've never really known myself... So there's a fascination with how things change through time, but also how different societies differ from each other, and how people understand them. Becoming more specific, it's also a fascination with how people conceive of that change through various forms of ideology, or through their practices, their religious beliefs, and so on. So I see my work as one of interrogating those pasts, and thinking about the ways in which we, today, use and understand them when thinking about the present. I know that there's no *necessary* relationship between those pasts and us; nevertheless, they are used, they are appropriated, they become helpful in defining ourselves and the communities of which we are a part, and the broader society within which we live. That's something I've always placed in the forefront of my teaching: to get students to think about why they are doing what they do; what are the intersections and connections between their own past and their conceptions of that past as conveyed through colleagues, through family, through the broader society, and how their past might be understood further through reflections on the present and vice versa.

As a historian, I have positioned myself for some time as a cultural historian. When I think back to my time as a student, one of the things I found really exciting was the general field of cultural history and especially processes of communication: the way in which people understand themselves, and the way in which they communicate that to others. When I say the way in which people understand themselves, I mean the way in which they see themselves as part of different circles of influence and understanding, as members of different communities. The notion of communication has been central to how I've understood history: how people are caught up in social networks and in networks of meaning, how they communicate that to themselves and to others, how they attempt to change the situations in which they live, and influence other people to support them in that change, how their multiple forms of action change their society, improve it, reform it – and that to my mind constitutes cultural history. Fundamental to my understanding of cultural history is that we are totally bound up with the world within which we find ourselves, and thus, as cultural historians, we need to understand the way in which people in the past understood their world and sought either to change it or to work within it.

Even as an undergraduate student I was very suspicious of simply understanding past societies through what people wrote in books. What was found in books seemed just a small part of the story, and maybe not even the most important part. Certainly, when I was a student, history was taught very much through documentation, through all manner of textual sources, and I felt one had to get *behind* those sources to understand the kinds of practices which enabled people to construct those sources. I always had much considerable scepticism or uncertainty that what people wrote about themselves and others was indeed what they believed, or whether they were in fact positioning themselves in order to achieve certain ends.

But when I first started my studies I especially reacted against a very narrow view of political history, or certain kinds of social history that were simply descriptive. For a while I saw myself moving from something like the history of ideas to intellectual history. And if I reflect back on that process, I can see I was trying to get away from ideas as existing in an unembodied way, outside the individual, to an understanding of how they operated within individuals and societies. But I then began to realise that intellectual history was also rather too narrow, and moved towards a cultural history. For cultural history includes ideas and the workings of the intellect, but considers these as practices which give history meaning, which help formulate it, and to which people aspire and commit in a variety of ways, rather than simply in terms of an intellectual response – through their imagination, through the actual physical, social, and cultural environment of which they are a part. For such reasons I was later attracted to a history of emotions. Prior to five or six years ago I was not working on emotions research; but looking back at what interested me, I can see that human emotions were in fact quite prominent among my interests. One of the authors that really excited me in my first year history course was Johann Huizinga; and after I began teaching, Lucien Febvre, the early Annalists and Norbert Elias, were prominent in the readings I set for students. So in actual fact, individual and collective emotions and psychology were certainly a part of my understanding of cultural history, although I did not specifically focus on them.

In the 2000s I also became very interested in ritual (in fact, I still am very interested in ritual, and performance). But looking at rituals five hundred years ago, the main sources will be literary. For the most part they will be descriptions of what happens, and so there is a necessity to read behind the text, or as the feminists used to say, between the lines, in order to understand – to try and imagine, if you like – what is being described, and to take seriously the position of the individual person describing it. So I have also had to be interested in structures. I went through a period of reading a lot of structuralism and post-structuralism, to the extent that I began to feel paralysed, unable to make those structuralist theories work in particular historical situations. But nevertheless I believe we do need to understand structures. For that reason, too, I've always been interested in the collective, because I don't think one can talk about the individual without the collective. Just as one has to negotiate different kinds of sources, one has to negotiate the tensions between individuals and collectivities. As well as performance and ritual, I have been intrigued by what visual sources can tell us (I'll come back to that in a moment), and also oral sources – even though the oral from an earlier period is generally conveyed through text. Working in religious history, then, I have been very interested in the role of sermons – trying to understand how sermons work in social and cultural communication between different social groups in a period in which literacy is quite limited.

To come back to the visual, that's been my fascination with images as well – to try to work out what place the visual has in our understanding of past and present societies. Indeed it's clear that in our own contemporary society, the visual is incredibly important. My interest partly stems from the fact that my father was an artist, as is a brother, and some of my early social networks included artists. So I've always been able to feel the power of imagery, the power of colour in shaping individual and social attitudes and moving people to action. So I've been puzzled that so few historians use visual sources, and have considered it my role to encourage student historians as well as my peers to do so. If there has been a consistent theme within my historical work over the past twenty or twenty-five years, it's been an attempt to communicate to my fellow historians the importance of the visual in writing their histories. I'm glad to say that more historians are using visual sources now than they did in the 80s, and that's a very positive development.

You briefly mentioned your migrant experience. Can you could tell us more about your personal history and how this has impacted you research and work?

Well, I came to Australia as a child from Czechoslovakia, leaving at the age of three and a half. That was in 1948, after the communist putsch in Czechoslovakia. My father decided, together with my mother I'm sure, that it was time to leave what he called "the madness of Europe" after he had experienced that madness directly and indirectly, after marrying my Jewish mother, who had come to study at the University of Prague from Ostrava in Moravia, who then converted to Christianity, and whose mother perished in Auschwitz. My father subsequently lost his position at the University, and was sent as forced labour to Germany during the last years of the war... I remember my father saying: "First there was the madness of the Nazis, and that was followed by the madness of the communists." He was a social democrat himself, held a position in the post-war Czech regime and knew the liberal Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk. When Masaryk jumped to his death, or was murdered, in March 1948 a few weeks after the communist putsch, my father decided it was time to go, and his understanding was that the further from Europe the better... Thus, as a child, I heard such stories as the reason why he decided to defect, and my elder brother and I were taken across the border into Austria through the fields at night.

I tell you those stories because as a child growing up, I had a fascination with this continent that my family had left. And the fact that my mother's family was Jewish was also quite fascinating: why did she convert? So as a teenager, I became very aware of the impact of political change, and migration, of how societies can be different from each other. And I felt very strongly – especially in the 1950s – how different this Anglo society seemed to be to the society my family had left behind. There was also the fact that my father was a young academic at the Charles

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University in Prague, but he now had to work in a factory (gradually his life changed; he did become a teacher in a teacher's college eventually). But the deep impact of politics and ideology on the lives of my parents, how they understood that, how they made sense of that and responded to it, was something that fascinated me, and I'm sure that was fundamental to my understanding of history and training as a historian. So that's an important basis for my fascination with different cultures and the relationship between cultures. Also, hearing about my father about the beginnings of the Czechoslovak nation in 1918 – when my father was nine – and how what was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire became Czechoslovakia – made me very aware of the fact that most societies are not monolithic, that they're multicultural in all different sorts of ways, and that they have quite different kinds of traditions within themselves. Whereas Australia – at least in the 1950s – was not nearly as multicultural as it is now. It was still a very Anglo culture... and that only began to change from the 1960s...

Maybe this background explains why I have always been strongly attracted to history, even if the intention of my initial foray into study was to become an archaeologist. But I thought of that as history... I was doing ancient languages, Middle Eastern languages, obviously through a fascination with my mother's family and heritage: Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, Ugaritic, and so on. But the teaching was poor, and after two years I decided I really wanted something more exciting. And I found that in History, where the teaching was much better, and the intellectual engagement was stronger...

A few years later the History Department went through considerable change from the time when I was first a student there. In fact, when I began my graduate studies in Germany, I never thought I would return to the University of Melbourne. But after a year of teaching at Monash University in Melbourne, a series of events occurred, and I was offered a job at The University of Melbourne... I was pleasantly surprised that in the years I'd been away, the Department had changed quite dramatically. We had a very charismatic new professor, who was an historian but also an anthropologist of the Pacific, Greg Denning. Greg was a very, exciting teacher, who introduced many of us to ethnographic history, to cross-cultural history, the writing of Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and Marshall Sahlins. That's really when I started reading the work of anthropologists and their theoretical interests moved me decisively towards cultural history.

Generally speaking, what are the people or books that have influenced you the most?

I don't think I'll go back to the things I read as a child so much, but what I *really* enjoyed reading as a child (and this was my mother's influence, the influence of a Central European bourgeois Jewish family) was a series of books we had on

German musicians – Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, and so on. This was very unusual – the children at school didn't seem to have those books – and I think it really did spur my imagination in terms of thinking about different societies once again. But I also loved the books on the explorers – on Cortés, on La Salle of the Mississippi... books about other lands, other societies, other environments, fascinated me. That certainly fed in to my total lack of interest in Australian society – something I was later resented. That changed decisively as I became more interested in politics at the time of the Vietnam War, and through that my interest in Australian history grew. But as a child I felt very European, rather than Australian, even in terms of the environment. My imagination centred on Europe; and only when I was about nineteen or twenty, I started to go on bushwalks and my love of the Australian environment developed. Also, Europe seemed to be where exciting things happened, where revolutions happened! None of that happened in Australia. Australia was a very peaceful society. On the other hand, I loved playing football, so I was very much rooted in this society. But in terms of my imagination – and certainly the past – it was very much a European past.

In terms of intellectual influences, moving on towards the end of my undergraduate years, I can think of a number of books that excited me a lot, such as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and works by the early leaders of the Annales School, Lucien Febvre on Renaissance Europe, Marc Bloch on feudal society and the royal touch, and Georges Duby on marriage; and later on Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean and early Capitalism, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie on Montaigne. Melbourne had developed a strong group of scholars interested in the Italian Renaissance, who looked across history and art history – notably my Masters supervisor and later colleague, Ian Robertson, and his students Bill and Dale Kent amongst others – and so I found it only natural to range across political history, social history and art history. In the work I was doing on humanism, Neoplatonism, magic and Kabbalah, I was also drawn to the Warburg and scholars such as Frances Yates and Daniel Pickering Walker. But at the same time I was very excited by Keith Thomas' new book on Religion and Magic, and soon after by the cultural history of Natalie Zemon Davis, John Demos, Philippe Aries, and later by David Sabean, Richard Trexler and Jean-Claude Schmidt, as well as my fellow Australian colleague and friend, Bob Scribner, writing on the cultural history of the Reformation. Greg Dening, as I've said, was a very important influence on me as I began as a young lecturer, and gravitated to the ethnographic history approaches represented by a strong group in Melbourne's universities, including the Dutch-American historian Donna Merwick, the historian of Virginia, Rhys Isaac, and the historian of the Aztecs and Maya, Inga Clendinnen. And there was of course Carlo Ginzburg and other micro-historians. Nor should I forget the excitement around gender history, and my guide and mentor, the Early Modern British gender historian from the University of Western Australia, Trish Crawford, and other gender historian

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working in my area in the early 1980s, such as Phyllis Mack and Merry Wiesner.

How do you conceive the role of historical research – or the historian – in the contemporary world and contemporary societies?

One very influential historian for me in respect to that question was Natalie Zemon Davis and her collection of essays on Lyon during the Reformation. I remember Natalie talking about the way the topics in her book meshed with her contemporary social experiences, ideas she later expanded on in her published conversations with Denis Crouzet. How her concerns for the violence of the Vietnam War led her to study the 'Rites of Violence' in the Reformation, how an interest in popular action at the same time made her alert to the need to understand *charivari*, how her experience as a young woman in a very male academy made her want to explore the world of female printers. I don't think I can draw a direct line between my living and writing, but I'm very aware of the way in which my thoughts about the present have always seeped into my thoughts and writings about the past. For me, the present is always very important for the way I imagine the past: the one interacts with the other.

Let me turn the question around: certainly, the present informs our reading of the past; but what is the place of one who reads the past in the present?

Well, let me begin with a negative: I become very irritated by people who, somehow, suggest we can find the solutions to the present in the past. I don't believe we can; we have to think of them anew. But the past does set up a range of different possibilities from which we can learn. None of those can be directly applied to the present, but the past presents us with a number of possibilities, which – in one form or another – can be projected into the present and the future. And I think that kind of projection, that sense of what possibilities there are in the future, marks the importance of the past for the present. So, how do I see myself? I see myself as someone who can relate those pasts – the various possible developments that *may* have occurred – to what did occur. I think this is fundamental to the historian; the realisation that there is no automatic line of development in history; that lines of development within cultures and societies depend on a whole series of events, pressures, attitudes, and we can therefore play a part in pushing developments in certain directions. I think that's a fundamental message I try to transmit as a historian: that we are all social and political actors. Our own action, of course, is not enough, but together with others we can at least influence the way in which change in our society can occur, even if sometimes very slowly.

In that sense, scholarship is also a political act?

Absolutely! I have always seen myself as a political actor. I never ran for political office of any kind – I was on school councils and so on, and someone once suggested I run for a local council position. That would not work; it's not me. But I do think that as a teacher and writer, we do influence people politically, and certainly some of our students. Political positions are fundamental to what we teach, and at times we certainly need to be quite explicit about those positions; that's certainly my understanding of the historian.

Can you tell us something about your own work on early modern religious history, and how this work may be related to present concerns?

My interest in the phenomenon of witchcraft, or the broader dimension of magic and the supernatural in the early modern world, possibly appears less political. It relates to the various ways we draw together our energies and understandings. We create myths about ourselves and it's these myths spur us into action and move us in particular directions. That's one of the things I've always been interested in. It's political in the sense that it highlights the broad belief systems that underpin policy and decision making, the way societies and their institutions are structured, the values and behaviour they condone and deplore, and why certain groups represent exemplary models while others are marginalised. In that way it encourages readers and listeners to apply such understandings to their own society. As far as witchcraft is concerned, I suppose a critical element in my interest is the way particular types of behaviour are created and attributed to particular groups within a society, and how such views achieve prominence and power, and then are translated into action. It's the process of demonization, of course, and I've found a study of that quite compelling – whether it's a case of witches, or heretics or Jews. The holocaust is never very distant in my consciousness; but so are contemporary political resonances. For in contemporary Australia over a number of years, as in other parts of the world, we see that process working for Muslims, and more generally for asylum seekers. The ways in which such views are constructed in different political circumstances, the way the witch or other is figured, is both interesting and significant. This is where the visual as well as the literary come into play, and tell us something about the way in which memories and attitudes are shaped. There I see a real analogy between the witchcraft phenomenon and some political situations in the present. Even though it's different, because witches were part of the community, almost like a fifth column that could not easily be identified, rather than an identifiable outsider group. But of course in that case stereotypes are even more important, in order to create a template and identify those groups through particular or alleged characteristics. And the analogy is real when we look at the process by which people are motivated to act against certain groups. This influences not only the prosecutors but also the

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victims. This probably encapsulates the most consistent (and politically relevant) aspect of my teaching and writing as a historian.

What is your view on the intersection(s) of belief, emotion, and empires, the topic of this issue of CROMOHS? How do you conceive of these, as objects of historical study and/or as analytical lenses through which cultural historians can look into the past?

This is something I'm unclear about: belief, emotions...but why empires? I presume the editors' idea is maybe, that through empires you create hegemonic forms of belief? The importance, it seems to me, of empires, is that there is the capacity to do that, even though empires of course include different kinds of communities. Empires – whether they be overseas or landed – are, generally speaking, highly multicultural. Nevertheless, at particular points of time you can call on those hegemonic beliefs in order to perpetuate the power structures within the empires. I suppose that this edition of *CROMOHS* might be trying to get at such processes. I look forward to reading the essays. But it seems to me that these processes will very much depend on the way specific empires work, because the main characteristics of empire have to do with a capacity to assure the loyalty of subjects and to ensure the extraction of certain levels of benefit from those subjects in the form of goods, money, or labour. For this, at particular points of time, there may be a tendency – maybe even a need – to establish some forms of general hegemonic belief: you establish a clerical class, as well as an officer class in order to ensure that happens, even if they are from quite different cultures. So that, even though the details of belief of the different groups within the empire vary, there is an overarching belief – whether in a particular god, emperor, or something else to which people bear loyalty – and this belief can be used to extract capital. In that sense emotions are crucial: loyalty requires emotion; loyalty is as much about emotion as it is about belief. Beliefs become the instrument for eliciting emotional commitment to certain imperial structures, and the system of professing such beliefs periodically, serves to maintain and reproduce loyalty. But I look forward to the issues raised by contributors to *CROMOHS*.

You are among the Chief Investigators of the Melbourne node of the Australian Centre for the History of Emotions. What can you tell us about the Centre, its project and achievements? Also, the history of emotions seems to be a burgeoning but very diverse field: how do you conceive of it yourself?

It's very difficult to put this briefly. First of all, one thing about the Australian Centre is that we are a very broad and very varied group of people, working in a multitude of disciplines, and it's not as though the Centre has one kind of overarching view as to what the history of emotions *is* and how we should pursue it.

And not only is that the case for the *national* Centre (CHE), but it's also the case for the various nodes of the Centre, such as that at the University of Melbourne – at which there are in fact three Chief Investigators, working in history, literature and music history. Not only do we work in different periods, on different topics and from different disciplinary perspectives, but we also have different views about how the history of emotions can be most usefully understood and used.

So it would be best if I talk about myself, and some of my colleagues. I think the first, maybe the most obvious, point to make, is that most of us, including myself, are not so much concerned with working on the history of particular emotions through time: that is, creating an understanding of the changing discourse about emotions. We touch on this in our work, and on the way it impacts on our analysis of various historical episodes and developments, but only a few in the centre are examining, for instance, the different way anger was understood in the twelfth to the fourteenth century, and then in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century. We are more concerned with the way in which emotions are very much an integral part of the way in which individuals and communities act: in other words, that action and change does not only occur through the impact of material or intellectual forces, but that emotions are always there as an integral part of a process of change. We need to analyse and understand the role that emotions have in any process of change. And then each of us are working on particular phenomena, at particular points of time.

Let me be a little more specific: as I think you know I'm working on a range of different projects, most of them to do with religious history; and I try to work out what role emotions have, collectively and individually, within those phenomena. Maybe I can mention one in particular, that has been preoccupying me recently. I've been looking at witches' dances: the way emotions can be read in visual documentation of witches' dances in the seventeenth century. I'm interested in how these dances portray witches as emotional beings and actors, and how emotions can then be created in viewers. These dances have simply not been analysed, and they are important, for they are virtually non-existent in the imagery of witchcraft prior to the seventeenth century, when they suddenly appear. The dances offer the opportunity to give expression to the emotions of witches, I would contend – in particular the emotional relationship between the witches themselves, which is also described, to some extent, in the accompanying literature. With this information we can then suggest (and we can only presume this) the kinds of emotions these images might arouse in viewers. What I've been trying to argue is that the introduction of dancing into witchcraft images is the result of people viewing witches as quite different: not only as individual actors who do harm to individual members of society, but also as a collective group that threatens the destruction of society as a whole. They become a reflection of popular anxieties, and are therefore imagined as a mirror society engaged in trying to wreak destruction on the society of which the viewer is part.

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That seems to me, to be a very significant change in the imagination created around the witch from one period to another, and it depends on understanding witches as having emotions.

What are you currently working on?

One of the other projects I've been working on at the moment is an exhibition, 'Love: Art and Emotion 1400–1800', that we're organising at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), as a collaboration between our Centre and the NGV, the most important repository of artworks from before the nineteenth century in Australia. Angela Hesson, a curator/ researcher whom the Centre and the NGV have appointed, is curating the exhibition, and we are editing a catalogue together with one of the NGV curators, Matthew Martin. We have just held a wonderful conference exploring the relationship between emotion and objects, both aesthetic and everyday objects, and how objects are used to create all kinds of emotional relationships between individuals and groups. Next May we will have a conference specifically focused on the ritual, spaces and bodies of love between c. 1400–1800, as well as a range of other activities. So that's an exciting new area of research for me; but it also represents an important way of introducing our emotions research to a broader public.

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