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CONFLICTING POPULAR CULTURE – POPULISM AND PUBLIC HISTORY

*Vlastimil Vondruška and the Instrumentalization of the Middle Ages*¹

Conflict is the salt of international politics. Hundreds of treatises have been written about the general mechanisms of government. Although they describe different models of governance and the principles of this phenomenon, they all agree on the basic idea that all ruling systems, from prehistoric times to the present day, have entropy (i.e., a tendency to automatically expand) deeply encoded in their genes. First and foremost, this fact must be understood if we want to rationally assess international politics, past and present. [...] War has always been cruel and painful, but people used to face each other. They could fight like knights, or even treacherously, but people fought people. Today's war is being fought by the Americans (and, according to infrequent reports, the Russians) as if they were playing a computer game. [...] I am ashamed of them because I honor chivalry. [...] War is a masculine matter, regardless of what we think about it. The pride of the nation is cemented by bloodshed. I'm not the one who invented this, several classics say so.

Vlastimil Vondruška²

In the academic discussions that followed the mass murder committed by Anders Breivik (who considered himself a Knight Templar) in 2011, rooted in an ideology based on fantasies about the European Middle Ages, the American medievalist Daniel Wollenberg stated:

When the Middle Ages are deployed to justify arguments about modern-day problems such as identity and heritage, then medievalists have a key role to play in ensuring that transhistorical fantasies are not allowed to persist. If culture is now the prime battleground of identity politics, and if old identities and old wars are new again, then we ought to be certain that we have a clear and cogent understanding of both the old and the new.³

Certainly, understanding not only the present, but also the past is crucial. Should academia be relegated only to “understanding better”? It is vital, especially under conditions of such dangerous upheaval, to try to think differently about academia's role and maybe even to imagine and support gentle transformations of its own way of grasping and performing knowledge.

Many large-scale projects exploring medieval society frame the scholarly value of these projects in terms of the modern-day concerns of individual researchers, insti-

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² Vondruška, Vlastimil: *Breviář pozitivní anarchie* [Breviary of positive anarchy]. Brno 2016, 154, 157-158, 158 respectively. All quotations have been translated by the author.

³ Wollenberg, Daniel: *Defending the West: Cultural Racism and Pan-Europeanism on the Far-Right*. In: *Postmedieval* 5 (2014) 3, Special issue “The Holocaust and the Middle Ages”, 308-319, here 319.

tutions, and communities. For example, research projects focusing on the crises of the later Middle Ages are looking for patterns and ways to represent and resolve conflicts, both intellectual and physical. These searches are formulated as an explicit reaction to the current state of society, politics and culture (not solely in Central Europe), which appears to be divided and polarized in ways similar to the ruptures and polarizations of late medieval society.⁴ However, this kind of framing should not remain a formality, masking self-contained research as a response to the public interest. Today's scholarly medievalist faces severe challenges: while part of academia is striving to analyze the Middle Ages to better understand how to orient itself and how to act in the present, several publicists involved in the culture wars use medievalist tropes to make extremist and misleading arguments.

The Hussite period has long been a focal point for interpretations of Czech history and the Czech national myth. It is not by accident that nowadays, for the voices of the populist far-right, the fifteenth century serves as an easily capitalizable setting of "politically incorrect" identitarian cultural production – be it music (e.g., Czech singer Daniel Landa's 2011 "Vozová hradba" [Wagon Wall] concert tour) or literature, more precisely amusing and racy pulp fiction. This is also true of *Husitská epopej* [Hussite epic] (2014–2018), a recent seven-volume series by Vlastimil Vondruška, an extremely popular and successful Czech writer of historical novels.⁵

For many reasons, Vondruška's personality represents a specific phenomenon in contemporary Czech popular culture. He is a businessman who has published several volumes of historical fiction every year (mostly with the Brno publishing house MOBA) for the last three decades. Most of his literary production is not explicitly political – it deals with the daily joys and concerns of "ordinary people". Drawing on two main genres – the historical crime novel and the family saga – Vondruška uses contemporary language and literary style to show different facets of medieval and early modern Bohemian society. The characters in those novels represent to a great extent his conviction that people have been the same throughout history: their behavior has always been driven by lust for money, sex, or power. According to the literary scholar Stefan Segi, the attraction of Vondruška's books comes from a tension between the exotically distant historical backdrop and the familiarity of the characters, their emotions, relationships, and motives. The genres of crime fiction and the saga also facilitate the use of several tropes common to genres ranging from romance to erotica and action thus making the books attractive to many different kinds of readers of popular fiction.⁶

⁴ This is also true of the project "From Performativity to Institutionalization" mentioned in fn. 1.

⁵ On Vondruška's intentionally conservative or conventional grasp of historical issues, see *Sixtová*, Kateřina: Jan Hus v české kulturní paměti [Jan Hus in Czech cultural memory]. In: *Marginalia Historica* 10 (2019) 2, 115–134. The author analyzes the effective media strategy used to promote Vondruška's books and how, from the perspective of reception, the authorial context strengthens the ways Vondruška's historical narrative and current political commentary are interconnected.

⁶ *Segi*, Stefan: Nekorektní literatura: Politická korektnost v české literatuře a literární komunikaci [Political correctness in Czech literature and literary communication]. Praha, forth-

Vondruška often presents himself – and is presented by the media – as a “historian”. He studied history and ethnography at the Charles University in Prague and at the end of the communist era he was the director of the historical section of the National Museum until the revolution in 1989.⁷ As already indicated, the broad historical background in his fiction, with its focus in the fifteenth century, represents a framework for narratives characteristic of mass-market romance novels. Nevertheless, while apolitical, pulp historical fiction is a major part of Vondruška’s literary production, it is not the only component of his literary activity. The focus of the following article will be his political commentaries – because (apart from their significant impact) Vondruška systematically attempts to legitimize them by framing them as the outcome of academic historical research. After a concise presentation of Vondruška’s political messages, I would like to offer some reflections on how academic medievalists should respond to this way of handling history.

Vondruška’s political medievalism

In 2018, Vlastimil Vondruška published his second book of political commentaries, *Epištoly o elitách a lidu* (Epistles about the elites and the people). Its title and content allow us to describe it as a textbook example of populist discourse. Its ideology is based on the construction of a sharp and conflictual division between the “elites” and the “people”. At the same time, the title is medievalist because it labels Vondruška’s essays as “epistles” and thus promises a transfer of ancient wisdom and common sense guaranteed by the ostensibly dissenting (from the liberal discourse of the elites), if not prophetic character of the author’s writings. The same was true of his older book, *Breviář pozitivní anarchie* (Breviary of positive anarchy, 2016), where the medievalizing part of the title evoked the idea of a daily, fundamental but easily accessible lecture; the rest of the title combined the need for good humor and courage as well as the construction of a false distance from the mainstream. Unlike the *Breviář*, the *Epištoly* represent not only a collection of newspaper columns and articles, but also a more systematic treatise about social theories. More precisely, it is a vulgar introduction to sociology:

Europe is currently experiencing a difficult period in terms of ideology. Thousands of years of the tradition of national values are being broken down, social ideas about the form of the family are negated, the migration crisis and many minor social, gender and sexual excesses have come to this and I do not know what else. Many historians know that there has been no similar accumulation of ideological changes in the past, and when such destructive attempts have occurred, they have always ended badly. They know it, but many have ideals in their souls, and they don’t want to tell unpleasant truths. Therefore, they proclaim not scholarly conclusions, but ideological dogmas [...].⁸

coming. – I would like to thank Stefan Segi for providing expert commentary on this aspect of Vondruška’s literary work. – A comprehensive chapter about Vondruška’s historical detective stories can be found in *Jareš, Michal/Mandys, Pavel: Dějiny české detektivky* [History of Czech detective stories]. Praha 2019, 412–422.

⁷ *Procházka, Lubomír: Vondruška jubilující* [Vondruška jubilant]. In: *Národopisná revue Strážnice* 25 (2015) 2, 133–134.

⁸ *Vondruška, Vlastimil: Epištoly o elitách a lidu* [Epistles about the elites and the people]. Brno 2018, 118.

Vondruška explicitly distances himself from what he labels as the “official” historiography.⁹ He reproduces a common rhetorical figure in the discourse of rightwing populism: science is no longer the guardian of truth. This affects not only the natural sciences – in denials of evolutionary theory, climate change, or most recently, epidemiology – but also the humanities, and, more specifically, history (typically Shoah denial – which Vondruška does not engage in). According to Vondruška, being a professional historian might be a weakness because academic institutions force scholars to interpret history in a politically correct way – instead of telling “the truth”. When academia proclaims “ideological dogmas”, Vondruška, unrestrained by scholarly demands and “ideals”, may seemingly assume the historian’s role and explain the relationship between the Middle Ages and the present:

In the Middle Ages, despite the dogma of the Pope and the arrogant cardinals [...], scholars sought knowledge, albeit within the limits of their faith. They were not afraid to express ideas that were, according to today’s diction, [politically] incorrect. That’s why they were able to move knowledge higher. The famous medieval scholar Abélard advocated the right to knowledge by a well-known thesis (at the time, however, [one that was] highly heretical): “I seek knowledge in order to believe.” But this idea is heretical even today. [...] Today, for the study of history and the interpretation of society, the truth is rather this: “I must seek knowledge in the way that I believe [politically] correctly.”¹⁰

Vondruška’s omnipresent medievalism is, significantly, marked by anti-clericalism.¹¹ Even his resistance to theory and his refusal to defend human rights is embedded in the synthesis of plebeian Czech nationalism with post-revolutionary secular cultural conservatism and economic liberalism. As a successful entrepreneur, Vondruška distances himself from the past and from Marxism (as he does from any other “ideology”). That is why he keeps attacking the Church (with its “Pope and the arrogant cardinals”) and traditional institutions while at the same time defending the “traditional values” these institutions have advocated since the Middle Ages. For example, this is how Vondruška instrumentalizes his discussion of medieval preaching:

“Preaching = medieval activism”: It was the same mechanism that works on the ideological level today. Under socialism, people were supposed to repudiate the remains of bourgeois decadence and intoxication with consumerism and instead [were called on] to wake up and fall asleep with the idea of a classless society and devote themselves to efforts to build [it]. Today, in turn, we are forced to combat the surviving ideas of national identity and tradition and replace them with multiculturalism, gender and boundless human rights. Preaching has always been and is an instrument of propaganda. The general framework of preaching in the thirteenth century was set by the papal regulations [...].¹²

⁹ Vondruška often uses the term “official ideology” (or even “official ideologists”, *ibid.* 99) and claims that “historiography, although it masquerades as science, is in a broader sense part of ideology” (*ibid.* 117). He also uses the phrase “official conception of the interpretation of history” (*ibid.* 116; in connection with historian Petr Čornej) or the “official sociological community” (*ibid.* 196).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 119 (cf. fn. 8).

¹¹ *Jareš/Mandys: Dějiny české detektivky* 414–415 (cf. fn. 6).

¹² *Vondruška: Epistoly* 78 (cf. fn. 8).

What could be described as a humorous thematic bricolage appears more serious when Vondruška uses more offensive language in discussing liberal discourse and human rights activists. In his rhetorical attacks, he focuses not only on present-day institutions and their “ideologies”, but also on individuals who critically point out their shortcomings. The author of *Breviary of Positive Anarchy* then transforms himself into an advocate of an authoritarian police state:

In the past, for centuries, activist movements have emerged as a symbol of resistance to the existing ruling elites. Nowadays, however, this model has been somewhat inverted, because activist movements are set up to help the ruling elites against opponents of the political opposition and part of the people. [...] Past activists [such as Christian heretics] have always had to be courageous because they fought against the powerful of their time. They did not expect a reward except for the one they [would] receive in the heavens. [...] Part of today’s activists do not fight against the powerful, but on the contrary, they serve them in a servile way.¹³

An important part of Vondruška’s own eclectic “ideology” is thus composed not only of an often-repeated accent on the dichotomy of the elites and the people, but also draws on quasi-scientific shortcuts and compressed theoretical residues. Their most significant sources are the materialistic theory of history as a means of social change and the diametrically opposed Spenglerian decadentist view of Western civilization as a culture on the decline. In addition to the combination of these two contradictory (d)evolutionary tendencies, history, in Vondruška’s interpretation, sometimes repeats itself but, of course, in most regards “history never changes”¹⁴. As Vondruška’s discourse comes closer and closer to those who speak for the populist far right, he emphasizes vague “Western cultural values” and their supposed contemporary decadence. His nostalgic imagination of medieval reality serves as a self-deceiving mirror:

The term “values” has always been rhetorically impressive and universally applicable in history because it is inherently indefinable. [...] If we do a survey of the Middle Ages and want to find out what Christian values were (if we disregard the Ten Commandments), then we will not find out either. And believe me (with my knowledge of the chronicles), for the French, a Christian value would be killing Englishmen and for Christians, without exception, killing Muslims. [...] We have our own values (equally difficult to grasp and define). But how much worse is our democracy than the Western one, why is our desire for freedom worse than the Western one, how [much] worse are we ourselves than those who live by the Rhine or in the land of the Gallic rooster? And, hand on heart, aren’t we even better in some respects? We have our own experiences and ideas of freedom, and the future will show whether, over time, disappointed Westerners will begin moving to us, to an oasis of values which the West has wasted.¹⁵

In this statement, Vondruška claims that the idea of “values” is decomposed and subject to relativization. On one hand, for advocates of human rights, liberal democracy, and the open society in general, there is nothing left to defend. On the other hand, for Vondruška’s audience, there is no need to define any of these values. Emotional adherence to them is more important – and what is crucial is the fact that

¹³ *Ibid.* 132.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 239–240.

in the Middle Ages, the French would not share these values with Muslims. This “fact” is framed expressly as a piece of knowledge guaranteed by Vondruška’s previous studies of unspecified medieval sources (“chronicles”). Having staged a fusion of doubt and affect, Vondruška then enters the scene wearing the mask of a rational, serious, pragmatic historian, one more trustworthy than the representatives of elitist academia. And once again, unlike the professional historians, he acts as someone who is not only more reliable, but also more understandable, closer to the people, because he explicitly devalues abstract thought and independent critical arts:

All the theater that was offered [in the Middle Ages] had to correspond to the taste of the common people. [...] I wanted to draw attention to two indisputable facts. The first is the tradition that theater performances were made for the audience. [...] The audience had fun, not the actors themselves. I feel that today’s so-called alternative theater does not think much about the viewer [...].¹⁶

The analogy drawn between the contemporary arts and scholarship, both viewed as detached from reality and from the needs of the “common people”, resonates with one of Vondruška’s own business areas: while previously devoted to glassmaking and making copies of historical glass, now, besides writing books, he also takes part in the praxis of popular culture – he acts in medievalizing vaudeville theater productions. Nonetheless, while he gains popularity and acquires an audience and resources by producing amusing stories and songs, Vondruška keeps returning to his guise of a serious historian (whose knowledge is not corrupted by academic institutions), presenting his opinions as undisputable scientific facts, when he writes about politics:

Politicians should never speak to the work of historians. This was true once, but it is still true today, when ideological disputes over modern history are going on, from World War II to hot-button issues. Politicians are quite willing to make historical judgments [...] and each would like to punish the other for his judgment on modern history. Whenever such disputes heat up, remember Charles IV. He was an emperor and had much more power than all of today’s deputies, party secretariats and advisors, yet he couldn’t do much in the field of historiography. That’s because you can’t interpret history as it suits [you], but [only] how it really happened.¹⁷

The example of Charles IV illustrates the impossibility of influencing objectivist historical truth from a position of power or ideology. Vondruška constructs the illusion of his beneficial independence from the system and politics – and therefore he can seemingly oppose “ideology” and present only solid and unchangeable facts. Despite this, he continues to write about history as the result of a well-controlled compound of laws, rules, and professional experience:

History repeats [itself] in basic mechanisms, whether we like it or not. All attempts to forcibly change the essence of human existence with its innate instincts have always failed. Chroniclers who did not bow to rulers used to be driven out of the country, the works of historians who wrote about things that politicians did not like were forbidden or removed from libraries, and writers who do not chant the values proclaimed by the ideologues of their time have also hard

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 101-102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 109.

times. [...] They should say what they understood from the study of history and human nature. If this is unpleasant for politicians, they should not keep it secret.¹⁸

The more Vondruška secures his arguments with declarations about the necessity of being independent of power and money and the more he puts on the mask of a common working man or a dissident rebel standing on the people's side against abstract global academic and political elites, the more important it is to mention his real attitude to the elites in the Czech Republic. Until the 2021 parliamentary elections, Vlastimil Vondruška was a loyal voice of the ruling politicians and one of the most visible representatives of political populism in the Czech Republic. On 28 October 2017, he received and proudly accepted Czech Republic's Medal of Merit of the first degree for meritorious service to the state in the area of culture from President Miloš Zeman, whom he openly supports. He was also a vociferous supporter of Andrej Babiš, the prime minister in 2017-2021. Vondruška also enjoys abundant and easy access to the largest Czech media, especially the journal *MF Dnes* (Young Front Today), which is funded by Andrej Babiš's trust fund, and *Parlamentní listy* (Parliamentary Papers), a server with common ground with disinformation services. During the curfew due to the coronavirus epidemic in 2020, he published an article in *Týden* (The Week, a magazine owned by the president's then open ally Jaromír Soukup), presenting the conviction that the contagion would lead to the dropping of unnecessary "modernist (i.e. feminist) inventions" and when the infection goes away, a healthy core of the nation will revive.¹⁹ Likewise, later, on CNN Prima News, he rhetorically diminished the significance of vaccines, comparing them to the medieval belief in the healing power of saints' relics.²⁰

In this context, Vondruška's historical analogies and populist medievalizing rhetoric appear as a much more serious matter than just an amusing eccentric appendix to romance novels. He presents history as a natural science with mysterious laws and regularities, which he knows and authoritatively communicates, but from there he also starts making judgements, predictions, and warnings about the future. This is not only the case in his romance novels – for instance, in 2019 he published an Islamophobic dystopian novel entitled *Kronika zániku Evropy* (Chronicle of the fall of Europe) – but more importantly, this is a significant feature of his political and historical commentaries:

It has been six hundred years since the Hussite Revolution, and only seventy since the Victorious February in 1948. This is a very short time. [...] But after six hundred years will have passed, there will be, as happened with the Hussite movement, many contradictory interpretations. As a historian, I am really sorry that I will not live to see it. I only hope that in the far future, nationalization after 1948 will not be celebrated as a first step toward building a just

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 102-103.

¹⁹ Vondruška, Vlastimil: Zdravé jádro Čechů modernisté ještě nezničili [Modernists have not destroyed the Czechs' healthy core yet]. In: *Týden* 14 (2020) 14-18.

²⁰ Interview by Tomáš Kačmár with Vlastimil Vondruška: Na mor se uživaly ostatky mučedníků. Budoucnost ohodnotí vakcíny stejně, tvrdí Vondruška [The remains of martyrs were used for the plague. The future will value vaccines equally, says Vondruška], 22.11.2021. URL: <https://cnn.iprima.cz/vondruska-na-mor-se-uzivaly-ostatky-mucedniku-budoucnost-ohodnoti-vakciny-stejne-51657> (last accessed 4.12.2021).

welfare state, Gusta Fučíková will not be a saint of gender equality, and President Antonín Novotný will not become one of Allah's prophets because he supported Yasser Arafat [...].²¹

While Vondruška's predictions remain intentionally vague (but his readers will understand perfectly where the analogy is going), on other serious subjects connected with specific current issues and policies, his opinions could not be expressed more clearly:

Refugees and Roma cannot behave towards Czechs [in an appropriate manner]. If someone wants to live in our territory, he should treat his hosts in such a way that he does not provoke them, [he should] accommodate them and respect their standards of life and their laws. Let us not force ourselves to comply with everyone. The foundation of charity has since ancient times been a balance between gratitude from the needy and the joy of doing good from the donor. Obligatory charity is not charity, but violence against decent people. Yes, let's help, but according to our capacity and will, and [give help] to those who really will be grateful to us in their hearts and souls. This is not racism, it is a justice proven over the course of a millennium.²²

The illusion of genuine historical knowledge serves as an argument supporting strong theses about racism (from which he obviously distances himself), xenophobia, and "natural law", which are also applicable in culture and political practice:

If we want to fix this society, we have to tell the truth. And that means to label things with the right terms, not to hide unpleasant facts by using euphemisms as ballast. What we communicate must be decided by factual accuracy and not by political correctness, sensitivity or personal ambition. We have tried and true terms for all events and states of society, let's not create new ones. The Czech language is extremely rich, let's use only those terms that have been known for centuries. Then we will definitely look at the world more realistically and act more pragmatically. Because our ancestors could not argue about a "migration crisis", they had to take up their weapons and defend their freedom and property.²³

Here Vondruška draws historical lessons learned from the supposed priorities of his "ancestors". In a way, this might be regarded as an incentive to violence (be it motivated racially or politically), presented as something historically natural, and therefore seemingly lawful. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that the tone of the most brutal passages is mitigated by the absurdity of others. Vondruška's quasi-scientific radical thesis promoting chauvinistic nationalism, authoritarianism, and the patriarchal world of an angry white man is often diluted by pieces of bizarre nonsense that provide some comic relief:

What distinguishes the Czech king George of Poděbrady from Obama? The first was small, heavy-set and fair, the second was tall, slender and dark. However, both of them were happy to promise a lot and to fulfill only the minimum. George of Poděbrady created the concept of a European peace policy (against the Ottomans), Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize (for the promise of peace in the Middle East, in which in turn the violence escalated). [...] The only real difference between the Czech ruler of the second half of the fifteenth century and the current US president is the fact that the king was elected with a mandate until his death, while the US president is only [elected] for a four-year term.²⁴

²¹ Vondruška: Epištoly 117-118 (cf. fn. 8).

²² *Ibid.* 227-228.

²³ *Ibid.* 250.

²⁴ Vondruška: Breviář pozitivní anarchie 151-152, 153 (cf. fn. 2).

To move forward, the above-mentioned examples may be a sufficient source of information about the opinions that Vlastimil Vondruška disseminates – on the pages of the most widely read Czech newspapers, under the auspices of prominent representatives of the state, and rhetorically framed as results of historical knowledge. In 2018, Vondruška made a remarkable appearance when, defending the then Czech prime minister, he compared Andrej Babiš to Jan Hus: just as Hus had to defend himself before the council of Constance, Babiš was forced to go to Brussels where he faced an investigation and a charge of conflict of interest and fraud.²⁵ This comparison and other statements articulating his support for the politician are in line with Vondruška's omnipresent anti-German and anti-European rhetoric.²⁶ At the same time, his denunciation of the civic protest gatherings of the *Milion chvilék pro demokracii* (Million Moments for Democracy) speaking out against the then prime minister in 2019 strangely contradicts his support for the common people against the elites – in the far-right populist perspective, the people are invited to support a strong, or even authoritarian, national leader, not to autonomously formulate criticism of the same.

Populism, talking heads, and engaged historiography

Given how interconnected he is with the political “establishment” (to use Vondruška's favorite term) in the Czech Republic, his extraordinary presence in the media, and, not least, the data provided by Czech booksellers and libraries (Vondruška's books are best-sellers and he is arguably one of the most read contemporary Czech authors²⁷), his literary production based on historical bricolage represents a major challenge for the academic community. As was stated at the beginning of this article, professional historians, and especially medievalists, are responsible for serious and systematic reflections about how to respond appropriately. There is no doubt that an obvious possibility for academia may be to ignore Vondruška's and others' similar activities and to continue doing the historian's traditional jobs, which are based on research and interpretation of the sources – regardless of the amateur popularizers who exploit them concurrently. Nonetheless, such disregard would be indisputably insincere and false. Judging not only from private conversations with professional medievalists, but also from some of their public statements, which bitterly recognize Vondruška's incomparably greater popularity and influence (e.g., remarks made by the leading Hussitologist, František Šmahel²⁸), it is evident that Vondruška's public attraction and impact are desirable and desired. This competition

²⁵ This has been critically analyzed, e.g., by Kadlec, Miloš: Reinkarnace Jana Husa v Andreji Babišovi aneb další znásilňování historie z pera Vlastimila Vondrušky [Jan Hus's reincarnation in Andrej Babiš or another assault on history by Vlastimil Vondruška]. In: Manipulátoři.cz, 21.12.2018. URL: <https://manipulatori.cz/reinkarnace-jana-husa-v-andreji-babisi-aneb-dalsi-znasilnovani-historie-z-pera-vlastimila-vondrusky> (last accessed 23.2.2020).

²⁶ Jareš/Mandys: Dějiny české detektivky 415–416 (cf. fn. 6).

²⁷ *Ibid.* 416 and 421.

²⁸ URL: <http://www.ceskahlava.cz/cz/napsali-o-nas/mezi-vladci-jsou-bile-jen-svetice-134> (last accessed 24.2.2020).

does not consist primarily of personal envy or longing for power – academia’s mission is to be heard and to produce knowledge that is respected and appreciated by society, or at least is partly presented in an understandable way and answers some of the questions society asks. Therefore, Vondruška’s success should clearly also be interpreted as a result of the academic community’s distaste for responding to the public’s demands.

In my opinion, ignoring Vondruška’s activities would be a failure on the part of the academic community. The first steps have been taken to analyze Vondruška’s obscured ideological background and manipulations of facts. This has been done by members of academia²⁹ as well as the “anti-hoax” server *Manipulátoři.cz*.³⁰ Long before Vondruška entered the field of politically engaged journalism, the academic community had started to remark on the vulgar, sensationalist character of his treatment of history.³¹

After such historiographical gestures, Vondruška may become an object of study, a case in point of plebeian demagoguery and ethnic nationalism (if not combined with white supremacy) mixed with vulgar historical materialism and an emphasis on deregulating business, anti-clericalism, sexist and xenophobic pragmatism, and so on. However, I believe that is still not enough. Feigned indifference, disdain, derision, and detached scientific description all slot too easily into the narrative that Vondruška himself constructs in order to gain and keep the public’s attention. It would mean to accept the unflattering role of the “arrogant elites” which the populist writer attributes to academia. Scholars should make more efforts – initiating discussions, continuing to propose projects exploring the role of history in contemporary culture, and being attentive to searches for new languages and new ways of approach-

²⁹ *Smlsal*, Jiří: Historik varuje! Vlastimil Vondruška a jeho poselství [A historian warns! Vlastimil Vondruška and his message]. In: *a2larm*, 6.4.2016. URL: <https://a2larm.cz/2016/04/historik-varuje-vlastimil-vondruska-a-jeho-poselstvi> (last accessed 23.2.2020); *Bažant*, Vojtěch/*Šorm*, Martin: Rozhněvaný bílý dějepisec. Vlastimil Vondruška jako zručný řemeslník a populist [Angry white historian. Vlastimil Vondruška as a skilled craftsman and populist]. In: *Dějiny a současnost* 39 (2017) 1, 51–52; *Stehlík*, Michal: Jan Hus v Bruselu [Jan Hus in Brussels], 17.12.2018. URL: <https://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/michal-stehlik.php?itemid=33051> (last accessed 4.12.2021).

³⁰ *Kadlec*, Miloš: Vlastimil Vondruška a literatura postfaktu [Vlastimil Vondruška and postfact literature]. In: *Manipulátoři.cz*, 13.02.2017. URL: <http://manipulatori.cz/vlastimil-vondruska-a-literatura-postfaktu> (last accessed 23.2.2020); *Kadlec*: Vlastimil Vondruška: znásilňování historie pokračuje [Vlastimil Vondruška: the assault on history continues]. In: *Manipulátoři.cz*, 13.05.2017. URL: <http://manipulatori.cz/vlastimil-vondruska-znasilnovani-historie-pokracuje> (last accessed 23.2.2020); *Kadlec*: Reinkarnace (cf. fn. 25). – See also a summary by *Růžička*, David: Radikalismus z lásky k vlasti. Portrét myslí nejpoulnějšího českého historika, který dostal sládkovské představy z dezinformačních webů do hlavního proudu [Radicalism out of love for the homeland. A portrait of the mind of the most popular Czech historian, who got Sládek-like ideas from disinformation websites, [which migrated] into the mainstream]. In: *datalyrics.org*, 10.09.2019. URL: <https://datalyrics.org/cs/radikalismus-z-lasky-k-vlasti> (last accessed 23.2.2020).

³¹ *Kreuz*, Petr: Popularizace s rozpaky: Vlastimil Vondruška, Katovny a mučírny [Popularization with embarrassment: Vlastimil Vondruška, executioners and torture chambers]. In: *Listy filologické* 120 (1997) 3–4, 352–356.

ing the public. I do not mean new technologies or quantitatively superior knowledge but rather, adapting approaches and updating messages – with the accent on a more critical analysis and, for example, making use of “Erinnerungskultur” – in the Czech Republic as well. Czech academia’s change of attitude toward the politics of memory seems necessary because its aim should not be just to outperform amateur historians or exceed their historical knowledge. As has become manifest, for instance in the case of a recent publication by Jaroslav Pánek, being a meritorious and professional historian is not a guarantee against spreading misinformation or abuse of the legitimate historian’s reputation to pursue an unscholarly, xenophobic political agenda.³²

I believe that the uncomfortable concept of populism, though unusual in connection with historians, may be extracted from the context of political science and rethought and utilized in a productive way. As Ernesto Laclau explains in elaborating his theory of populism, the rhetorical construction of the rupture between the elites and the people is based on what he calls “empty signifiers”. Both “people” and “elites” are nothing but discursive constructions, which do not preexist the populist movements.³³ Even populist politics may not necessarily be destructive. Following up on that, I would like to propose that a similar approach might apply to scholarship – at least in some of the performative dimensions of researchers’ activity.

Vlastimil Vondruška is actively and explicitly taking part in the process of constructing the populist rupture, giving it a historical or, more precisely, a “mythical” narrative. His form of populism is the one which is politically prevalent in contemporary Central Europe: it is based on promoting ethnocentric nationalism and defending strong individual leaders. But there are also other forms of populism which are trying to address society in more inclusive and progressive ways. This has been demonstrated for instance through an analytical comparison of the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in 2016.³⁴ The actual content of the populist performance is not important for this analysis – it is the form and distribution of functions between the politician (or the historian) and the people (society) that matters. On one hand, Donald Trump’s message was about him personally, in the role of a charismatic leader of the people standing against the elites while hiding his tight allegiance to them. On the other hand, Bernie Sanders was targeting the

³² Pánek, Jaroslav: *European Migration Crisis (An Outline of the Topic in 27 Points)* – *Evropská migrační krize (Náčrt tématu ve 27 bodech)*. Pardubice 2018.

³³ Laclau, Ernesto: *Populism: What’s in a Name?* In: Panizza, Francisco (ed.): *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London 2005, 32–49. On the danger of identifying “populism” with “rightwing populism”, see Brown, Katy / Winter, Aaron / Mondon, Aurelien: ‘Populist’ can be a weasel word for ‘racist’, and that’s dangerous. In: *Opendemocracy.net*, 16.10.2019. URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/populist-can-be-a-weasel-word-for-racist-and-thats-dangerous/?fbclid=IwAR0YiCšClqp79XQdAMmMOJezOhbšuB2n7qjsxf9tudl8irbaVCB0N3WlOY> (last accessed 24.2.2020). – I would like to thank Eva Svatoňová for her expert consultation in this area.

³⁴ Macaulay, Marcia: *Bernie and the Donald. A Comparison of Left- and Right-Wing Populist Discourse*. In: Macaulay, Marcia (ed.): *Populist Discourse. International Perspectives*. Cham 2019, 165–195.

people as an active force. Sanders rhetorically mobilized grassroots activists, his language empowered minorities and disadvantaged citizens and supported local and small initiatives.

How could this be possibly inspirational for historians (naturally, including all those who may not be among Bernie Sanders's supporters)? In the debates during the conference "Mittelalterrezeption in der Gegenwartskultur", some participants called for a more rigorous understanding of the past and for countering myth with more knowledge. I think historians can be even more ambitious – they need to continue rethinking the role of academia, reenact discourse about values, and open themselves to further conceptual changes in the discipline of historiography. Even medievalists should respond to the public need for myths or stories – but not only by negating them and deconstructing them. My point is that historians have the unrivalled competence to explain how stories about the past work, how the researchers construct new ones, and why stories function as indispensable media of facts: an integral part of a historian's role is to testify that myths might be both dangerous and beneficial. Unlike historicizing popular writers, the academic community is responsible for offering new myths while at the same time thematizing and accentuating their constructed nature.³⁵

This means that the science of history might embrace some of the positive appeals of the progressive populism without leaving behind the traditional virtues of scholarship (and "centrist" anti-populist politics): civility, expertise, deliberation, rationality, freedom, and responsibility.³⁶ Professional medievalists will obviously never be able to concentrate fully on correcting or refabricating populist messages and competing with demagogues and public figures who are medievalizing businessmen. Nonetheless, historians should pay attention to the way they think and speak about making and presenting history. If we think of Vlastimil Vondruška as an analogy to Donald Trump among historians (Vondruška's comparison of George of Poděbrady to Barack Obama might be inspiring, after all), we should take notice of him as someone who is not only vulgar, xenophobic, and sexist, but also and more importantly, is a typical representative of "talking heads". He personifies a seemingly messianic or prophetic individual (but disembodied) authoritative voice, explaining to the passive people what it used to be like in the past and how the mysterious mechanism of history works.³⁷ Trump's and Vondruška's conception of populism does not

³⁵ This conception goes even slightly beyond the accent on interpreting the past (in contrast to pure description or celebration) in the current debates. See *Pešek, Jiří*: Hlas k interpretaci pestrých evropských dějin [A contribution to the interpretation of colorful European history]. In: *Český časopis historický* 117 (2019) 2, 482-487.

³⁶ Recently, the virtues of "anti-populism" have often been mentioned in critical contexts, such as, e.g., *Moffitt, Benjamin*: The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe. In: *Democratic Theory* 5 (2018) 2, 1-16.

³⁷ Criticism of historians as ostensibly objective talking heads has been formulated by *Baloun, Pavel/Gruber, Jan/Mareš, Jan/Strobach, Vít*: O výuce historie za kapitalismu a o mluvících hlavách [On Teaching History in Capitalism and on Talking Heads]. In: *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* 9 (2012) 1, 121-144. – See also *Činál, Kamil*: Public history/dějiny ve veřejném prostoru. In: *Historie – otázky – problémy* 10 (2018) 1, 7-12, here 8.

motivate civil society to engage in politics or history, it does not inspire people to fight (for better environmental and social conditions or deeper knowledge) nor to hope.³⁸

In my opinion, historians' reaction to Vlastimil Vondruška's success and his simplistic but dangerous reenactments of late medieval and early modern conflicts in contemporary public space should be to stop performing as charismatic and omniscient individuals, haughtily presenting their monological experience and knowledge. (As is typical of his vulgar essentialism, Vondruška does not frame himself theoretically; in contrast, Czech academic medieval studies should cultivate their own explicit conceptualizations). The academia represented by singular authoritative "talking heads" tends to generate false expectations, which it will never be able to meet responsibly. Instead of this, on one hand Czech historiography's institutional emphasis might first be put on the collective, non-individualistic nature of research, and on the other hand, on cultivating the politics of memory and the broad field of public history – professionally bridging the growing gap between expert scholarship and popular culture.³⁹ Medievalists therefore need to systematically improve not only their communication and presentation skills, but above all to act in such way that non-experts become interested in approaching the past critically, creatively, and confidently. Accessibility does not mean simplicity and contempt for theories, but consistent methodological transparency and reintroduction of the language of values – and hand in hand with that, subjectivity, responsibility, and participation.

Academic medievalists should try to face demagogues of Vondruška's type not so much by elaborating their own personal transmissive abilities, nor by improving and deepening their knowledge of the past as such, but rather by translating pedagogical reconstructivism into their own academic work – primarily by examining and presenting historiography as a landscape of ancient and recent reconstructions of the past. These reconstructions, both old and new, need to be presented as meaningful and functional. The limits and the "rough" nature of knowledge, values, and transparent concepts and methods need to remain an integral part of scholarly communication.⁴⁰ And this cannot be restricted merely to books, lectures, and expositions, but at least to the same extent it should comprise sincere academic involvement in preparing teaching materials, movies, TV series, and computer games.

When seeking possible ways out of the conflict between scholarship and the "transhistorical fantasies" of the political far-right, another conflict ought to be seriously discussed – between the "scholarship of the elites" and scholarly activity serving the public interest. This service is already widely present in the field of the poli-

³⁸ Here I draw on the concept of hope proposed by Teresa Shewry: *Shewry, Teresa: Hope*. In: *Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome/Duckert, Lowell* (eds.): *Veer Ecology. A Companion for Environmental Thinking*. Minneapolis/Minnesota 2017, 455–468.

³⁹ *Liddington, Jill: What Is Public History? Publics and Their Pasts, Meanings and Practices*. In: *Oral History* 30 (2002) 1, 83–93.

⁴⁰ Cf. Terry Eagleton: "To be exact, interpretation must be creative. It must draw upon tacit understandings of how life and language work, practical know-how which can never be precisely formulated [...]. If we want to be as clear as possible, a certain roughness is unavoidable." *Eagleton, Terry: After Theory*. London 2003, 206.

tics of memory, accentuating multiperspectivity, subjectivity, and ethics. Medievalists and specialists in contemporary history share the task of systematically focusing on motivating the public to be actively interested in their own personal experiences with the past and their conflicting local, familial, and collective histories. The public interest which academia serves is in fact a refined conception of Vondruška's "people" – it designates a civil society informed of its own historical agency, responsibility for, and active participation in cultivating its collective memory. This conception of historiography, which reintroduces ethics and values, could better prepare "the people" to be critical and to accept the plurality of the stories and myths that history and its interpretations unavoidably offer – including the myth of corrupt academic "elites". Such scholarship and education would be more participative and would empower society in order to show that history, including the Middle Ages, may be creative and therefore "popular" also in a cultivated and responsible way. And that it is not simply a product of facts and natural laws, but of sources and their interpretations.