

What Do Historians Do?

Interview with Rainer Buschmann

Rainer Buschmann: My name is Rainer Buschmann. I teach Pacific history and world history at California State University Channel Islands.

Shane Carter, ORIAS Interviewer: And were you trained as a historian?

Rainer: I was not, I actually have a BA and an MA in Anthropology, and I switched to history late in my PhD studies because I was a little bit disenchanted with anthropology.

ORIAS: Got it. So, can you define what you think history means?

Rainer: Yes, I can try. So this one, history for me is a discipline that pretty much is more than just dealing with the past, it's really dealing with the past and the present. And as I get older, I also see that it also has a lot to do with the future, especially-- well, certain branches such as environmental history, for instance, have a lot of, a lot of possibilities to make predictions in the future, especially as we are facing what many people now call a climate crisis in the next 10 to 20 years.

So history has the ability to study those kind of patterns in the environment that we see as long term, so not just 10 to 15 years, but we talk about cycles that are probably hundreds, if not thousands of years.

ORIAS: Oh, so you feel like what's going on now, we can look at what has happened in the past with other climate cycles and get some insight?

Rainer: Yes, I believe that it's very important to do that, especially to differentiate between what is actually climate and what would be some sort of man-made influences, and I think history is very well suited for that.

ORIAS: What do you love about doing that? What do you love about studying it or thinking about it?

Rainer: About history, what I love about studying history is that there's something I learn every day that's-- not every discipline can say that, but the history there's always a tremendous amount of learning, and every time you open a book, every time you read something, there's something you walk away from and there-- there's never an end, there's never an end when you can say, "Now I know it all."

As a matter of fact, certain things that one reads just opens up possibility and new sources of inquiry, so basically one has to turn to all kinds of new avenues to explore certain things.

So history is basically a discipline for life, you know, whether one is connected to it as a professor teaching that discipline or just a student, it's just something that never lets you go, and that sort of passion for learning is never lost to the discipline.

ORIAS: That's how I feel about it, actually, also, and I think it's interesting because, of course, conversations for students have to do with what kind of job you can get, and that's important, obviously, you have to keep body and mind together, but in an ideal world, we're all more than our work, and so I don't know, I think it makes my life better, I think it makes me happy.

I would like to know one or two interesting questions, since you talked about being able to learn something every day, interesting questions that have directed your research.

Rainer: What is interesting is that my questions is-- it's more like I don't necessarily ask questions in advance, I find, and especially history is very good at this, that questions find you. I'll give you one example to illustrate this.

In 2009, I published my dissertation and I thought I was done with that. It was basically-- it was a dissertation about German anthropology in New Guinea during the colonial era, and I thought that chapter was done.

Then, within the last year or so, all of a sudden, Germany had a colonial crisis, basically because they're building a new museum, a very expensive museum within Berlin, and all of a sudden, the research that I did about 10 to 20 years ago was once again at the forefront.

So well, I walked away from that research, seeking to tackle as to why Germans acquired so many artifacts in a very short period of time between the late 19th century and the early 20th century, now all of a sudden seem relevant because Germans are trying to answer that question as well, and especially also seeking to answer the question whether some or all of these artifacts should be returned.

ORIAS: Oh, the museum question?

Rainer: Yes, so basically it's not a question that I necessarily ask, but it is a question that is asked of me and my research, because there's now a lot of people from the Pacific who are looking at German museum collections and are saying, "Well, how did this stuff get there?" "And was it done through proper channels, and should this-- should these artifacts be returned to the countries of origin?"

ORIAS: And so that connects to what you did because you were asking kind of what's the impetus behind doing this collecting to begin with, which gets at the motivations of the people.

Rainer: Yes.

ORIAS: How do you answer a question like that, 'cause that seems pretty psychological.

Rainer: I, you know, I-- it's actually interesting because the way you answer that question is through a motive, and yes, it is psychologically, but people write a lot, so-- and the answer comes out of the correspondence.

And because Germany has a tremendous amount of correspondence, you look through hundreds, if not thousands, of letters and you find out why people collect that stuff in the first place.

And it usually comes down to maybe a handful of motives, the most obvious one would be money, compensation, but others would be decorations, and out of these motives then comes what I would consider world history because it connects the Pacific with Germany in interesting ways, and what I'm doing now is basically finding new ways of exhibiting artifacts.

ORIAS: What do you mean?

Rainer: Because one of tw-- you know, anthropologists basically seek to do two things, one is to make the strange familiar, but more and more, we also seek to make the familiar strange, and that's something that comes out of these new exhibits, or I'm hoping comes out of this new exhibit.

ORIAS: To see yourselves differently, not just the people you're looking at?

Rainer: Yes, and then it's-- you also realize it's not just something that is German, but it's a French problem, it's an American problem and it is an-- it's become an issue, how you're dealing basically with this incredible postcolonial moment that is occurring before our very own eyes.

Well, you know, even if the colonial period is done, you know, museums that carry these artifacts from Africa and Oceania, for instance, are still there, and they need to be historicized and understood, and perhaps-- I mean, there are some radical voices that even say completely changed.

ORIAS: You mean like everything repatriated?

Rainer: Yeah, or at least the exhibit needs to be, needs to be different. You know, some of the exhibits, if you go into museums, the exhibits haven't changed since the 1950s, it's all about different cultural areas in Africa or the Pacific, and these areas as such don't exist no more, you know.

I mean, the, you know, the museums gives this sort of image of Africans still being stuck in the 19th century, but there's a lot of changes there, and there's a lot of individuals from Africa who are saying, "Well, maybe we need to do new exhibits, or online museums that reflect this type of stuff."

There's even a radical-- I don't agree with that, but there's a radical faction that says we should get rid of museums altogether.

ORIAS: Because of the time capsule sort of element that you're talking about, where here I live in modernity, I'm looking at you from the 19th century, and I have the impression that that's you today, and it's reinforcing that?

Rainer: Yeah, it's reinforcing certain colonial stereotypes, yes, absolutely.

ORIAS: One of the things I really struggle with, with world history, is the fact that it's history and that it's so tied to written texts, but there are so many parts of the world for which we do not have written text or we have untranslated written text.

And I guess I'm wondering, how do you-- when you're doing Pacific history, how do you address that gap in places that-- where you don't have a written record-- you know, you have an asymmetrical written record where you have a written record on the European side that goes back farther than the written record on the Pacific side, but you're trying to look at both of them, and so you have this narrative that has two characters, but one of them only develops its own voice in writing after many years of interaction.

Rainer: One way I address that is by looking at-- you mentioned written records, I mean, clearly that indicates a certain Western bias as to what history is and should be, so there's two ways of dealing with it really.

One is what historians call to read against the grain, so in other words, take these Western sources, since you don't have necessarily a non-Western source equivalent, and read these sources differently, not as they intended.

For instance, you take a missionary source that you know the intent is to convert individuals, let's say in Latin America or in Africa, and therefore often talks disparately about the cultural practices.

Yet it does talk about these cultural practices and therefore, instead of just taking the opinion of the missionary, just read these cultural practices for what they are. That's called reading against the grain.

The other possibility is simply-- and that's what many anthropological-inspired historians are doing, is simply saying, "Well, why are we focusing just on written records, why are we not allowing-- since we are anthropologists, to understand"-- some radical anthropological historians even want to go and get rid of the term history, because it's Greco-Roman in origin, so let's just replace it with something like dealing with the past, for instance.

And therefore, identifying other sources that are important for the people in the Pacific, in Africa, in Latin America, examples of this would be tattooing or performance, you know, hula dances for the Hawaiians, for instance. The artifacts that I alluded to earlier in the museums, also different kind of sources that uncover different kind of history and also different types of doing history, because there are many historians from Africa, from the Pacific, who are basically saying this emphasis on written history simply may not cast light on how history is remembered and performed.

Perhaps the performance of history is there-- therefore much more important than whether to get things right, you know, this whole obsession with objectivity might not be at the center of what it means to do history in Africa or Oceania, for instance.

ORIAS: Thank you, because that's actually something that's really-- it-- for me is like a striking problem for the word "world" in world history, because those two words together almost sound contradictory to me. Okay, the only question that I didn't ask you that I had on the list here was whether there are questions about the past that you think are not historical questions. I feel like I-- we strayed into this a little bit, but do you want to answer that directly?

Rainer: I mean, the easy answer would be no, I think everything that is in the past should be a historical question, it's just what-- certainly we can't ask all of the questions, I think we simply don't have the tools.

And our tool set has changed to the better, I believe, for instance, we're asking now questions that we wouldn't ask about 100 years ago. So, simply because we now have GPS, we have satellite imaging, so we can look at a lot more things that we did not have. The Internet gives us a possibility too, to represent history in much more ingenious ways.

I think what history and historians have lost, and I'm saying lost in a good way, not in a bad way, is a fear of flying, and that basically means we get much more adventurous about what we're doing.

And we are no longer tied to written records, to the archives, now we ask much more interesting questions about not just the archive as a building, but why was the archive built? Why are certain sources held in certain archives?

So I think historians are becoming much more-- should I say it? Yeah, I find much more adventurous. The sort of stereotype of historians being, you know, inherently boring, you know, individuals that, you know, sit in offices or sit in archives, I think is no longer applicable.