

# Problem is: What to Read

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*The anniversary issue of K & K 47—48 (20 years) published by mistake only a fraction of this contribution. We apologise to Kamila for this mistake and publish her full contribution. Kamila has been translator and contributor to K&K since its foundation. (S. A.)*

*Kritika & Kontext* is 20! In other eras, 20 years might span a rather uneventful period. But *Kritika* came into existence at a time when the internet admittedly already existed, but few considered it their main source of information; at a time when borders were already open, but few of us were able to make use of this for more than tourism. During Meciar's government it was almost impossible to study abroad, including in the Czech Republic. As a result, most foreign books and articles were unavailable to us. Thus, *Kritika* shaped at least one generation of those interested in reflection on and analysis of public issues, and in the thinking inspired by these. I had the good luck to belong to this generation. My debt to *Kritika*, and to the Society for Higher Learning that was tied to *Kritika* in more than one way, including sharing its offices on Medena Street, is enormous. They crucially expanded my horizons and directed my interests.

But times have changed, the Society for Higher Learning was replaced by BISLA, and *Kritika*, too, has a more suitable home. Globalization and communication have brought about even more fundamental changes. It might seem that a journal like *Kritika* no longer has place in this world. After all, everything can be accessed online - even if it is not always for free. But the key problem is not the fact that online content is locked behind paywalls, even if without institutional subscription access to articles in the social sciences is practically impossible. In an era of excessive information and abundance of texts and opinions, the chief problem is to know what to read. I see this with my students. They need perhaps even more guidance in what and how to read, how to orientate themselves in the maze of texts of differing quality, than the generations before them. And this guidance is also needed by the rest of us, including those of us whose professions aim at cultivating and expanding knowledge. We are ever so narrowly specialised and are losing the wider context. And because of this I wish *Kritika & Kontext* at least 20 further years of existence.

To commemorate the anniversary, I would like to direct *Kritika's* readers to a text that crucially shaped my professional orientation and

actually my whole life. When I started reading this 150-page book for the first time, one autumn evening in Budapest in 2000, it captivated me so much that I could not put it down, and read it overnight. Albert O. Hirschman's book *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton University Press, 1977) addresses the thesis that several European thinkers responded to the social and political problems of their times by trying to reorient the main categories of analysing human behaviour and related political values, and by trying to redirect the discourse from that of human passions to that of interests. This thesis and the way it was developed appealed to me so much that out of the several social scientific and humanities fields I was studying at that time I decided on political theory as the principal area of my study and research. I am still amazed by the discovery that ideas can crucially impact history. And Hirschman's book is still taking away my sleep, although now for different reasons. Can a change of categories and values still change history today? And what values and categories should these be when those that appealed so much to Montesquieu or the Scottish Enlightenment, which included Adam Smith among others, are today perceived more as part of the problem than a solution? Even if this text does not give direct answers to questions like these, it teaches us to think in a way that will lead us there. And this is precisely what distinguishes good texts from others, and what best characterizes the journal *Kritika & Kontext*. Because of this, I wish *Kritika* many happy returns of the day.

