

ХРОНИКА

CHRONICLE

ИНТЕРВЬЮ С ПРОФЕССОРОМ Г. ТОРВАЛЬДСЕНОМ



В ходе Международной конференции по исторической демографии, состоявшейся в июне 2015 г. в Уральском Федеральном университете, профессор Л. И. Бородкин (МГУ) взял интервью у профессора Г. Торвальдсена (Prof. Gunnar Thorvaldsen, University of Tromsø, Norway). Текст интервью приводится ниже.

Л. Б.:

Dear Gunnar let me ask you some questions related to the current situation in the field of IT applications in the humanities (and — mainly — in historical research and education).

Л. Б.:

Dear Gunnar, I remember «glorious time» started in the end of 1980s when historical computing attracted a lot of historians who discovered new promising and bright possibilities of IT applications in history. 25

years passed since those years. Could you characterize new trends in this field?

Г. Т.:

— Yes, those were the days! But looking back, I must admit that we were a relatively limited group of historians, mainly interested in quantitative methods in demography and social history. A lot of good scholarly work has been done in this area with computer methods, just consider the bibliographies at the Demographic Database in Umeå and the Minnesota Population Center. Meanwhile, the use of IT has spread to nearly all work performed by historians, of course mainly word processing, e-mail and social media, but also the structuring of textual source material and text retrieval among qualitative data resources.

Л. Б.:

In Russia we discuss now what are the borders and contents of Digital Humanities. What is your opinion on this subject in the context of teaching historical disciplines, historical research and developing infrastructure?

Г. Т.:

— I work in the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Teacher Training at the University of Tromsø. This functions very well for our discipline, since our topics and methods are relevant across these faculty sphere and we sample methods and theories from many neighbouring disciplines. Thus, I go for a wide definition of Digital Humanities, where text retrieval from the works of Greek philosophers is as relevant as multiple regression analysis in demography — of course, depending on what kind of research questions are topical in each particular study. Many students start out with a quite high level of general computer literacy. We should be better at employing this as a basis for training quantitative and qualitative computer research methods, especially competence in statistics is lacking.

Л. Б.:

During the long period you are involved in the large projects in the field of historical demography. Could you tell us about new tendencies in this field? What are the most impressive examples? Do you consider large scale projects in the field of historical demography as exam-

ples of application of «Big Data» methodology in historical research?

G. T.:

— The Census Projects in the Minnesota Population Center have collected data from most countries in the world which have been used in numerous studies. Unfortunately, Russian censuses and modern materials from Scandinavia are still exceptions. A more recent tendency is to include full count censuses rather than random, representative samples. This facilitates the study of small minorities, such as the religious dissenters in Norway. The Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Society used the English church registers to project the population development of the country with advanced IT techniques. There are source critical problems, but now we have a basis for assessing English historical demography, previously we knew little. The longitudinal databases in Sweden and the Netherlands, which are now becoming more available through the Intermediate Data Structure (IDS) and the European Historical Population Samples Network give a solid basis for life course studies. I hope our work on the Transylvanian database of church records and the Norwegian Historical Population Records will result in similar infrastructures.

When there are as many records in the Census Projects as there are users on Facebook, no doubt we are dealing with «big data». Also, the scanning of research libraries in the US done by Google contains huge collections of historical literature that would otherwise be unavailable in practical terms. However, it is still a problem that these «big data» collections are less easy to access from outside the US.

Л. Б.:

We know that last years you lead the research project in the field of historical demography conducted in

the Ural Federal University. Could you tell us about this project?

G. T.:

— The *Idun* — International Demographic Unit was established in the UrFU in 2014 and attempts to employ demography and social science methods to analyze the rich collections of nominative source materials in Russian archives, particularly in the Urals. While historical census records may be less available than in many other countries, there are rich collections of church records covering the two centuries before the revolution in many places which can be the basis for a host of important studies, if we can meet the challenge of transcribing, encoding and linking them on the individual level. In addition there is ongoing work with census-like materials, such as the Communist Party censuses. *Revizskie skazki* (taxation lists) have been transcribed in cooperation with the European Mosaic project. In June 2015 *Idun* organized the conference «Religious Communities and Demography in Church records: Statistical analysis» sponsored by the RFBR with participation from many European countries. A special issue of *History of the Family* will describe these projects, and a couple of articles are already online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/showArticles?journalCode=rhof20#.VY-AHfmqpBc>

Л. Б.:

Dear Gunnar, on behalf of the editorial council of the Journal «Историческая информатика» (“Historical Information Science”) let me express our gratitude to you for your comprehensive answers.

Leonid Borodkin