INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR STEPHEN VLASTOS

Logan Brady and Hannah Chisler
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Key
LB: Logan Brady
HC: Hannah Chisler
SV: Stephen Vlastos

Logan Brady: Today is Monday March 10th, 2014 my name is Logan Brady and I am here with my fellow interviewer Hannah Chisler. We are in room 163 Schaeffer Hall at the University of Iowa interviewing the current Chair of the University of Iowa History Department, Professor Stephen Vlastos. Would you like to start off telling us a little bit about your early years, your childhood, or hometown?

Stephen Vlastos: I was born in Ottawa, Canada on November 18th, 1943, which is in the middle of World War II. My father was in the RCAF [Royal Canadian Air Force]. As you may know, the war in Europe started a year and a half before the U.S. entered the war. He was mobilized and served in both England and Canada during World War II. My mother worked in a governmental position in Ottawa which was the capitol of Canada during the war. At the end of the war, the family moved back to Kingston, Ontario and lived where we remained until the summer of 1948 when my father, who was a professor at Queens University in Kingston, moved to Cornell. So my grade school years were in Ithaca, New York. Then he moved to Princeton, New Jersey, and so my junior high school and high school were there.

LB: What kind of kid were you, such as adventurous etc.?

SV: Yeah, I would say so. I love the outdoors. There wasn't any television so as a child I spent all of my time outside. We had a cottage on Lake Ontario that we would keep going back to. I love sports and before school and after school we would be playing sports.

LB: Did you play high school sports?

SV: I played organized sports. I played soccer and baseball in junior high and in high school I did soccer and track for Princeton High School. In college I wasn't at a skill level for track. I was not nearly at the level needed to be on the university team, but I did go out for fencing, which was one of the very few sports where there wasn't the expectation of having

performed at the high school level. So I was on the fencing team for three years. In fact, my junior year, Princeton won the NCAA.

LB: What did you want to be when you grow up?

SV: Well, until my junior in college I was anticipating going into the U.S. Foreign Service. Then I became very interested in Constitutional Law and I guess by my junior year I was planning on going to apply to law schools. But then in my junior year, kind of by accident I took a comparative literature course. One of the novels we read was set in China in 1927, that is a key year because it is the year in which the nationalist party completes its initial campaign which begins in the south in Canton, their base and extends through south Chan to Shanghai. Then in Shanghai there is already a radical movement. Mainly a labor movement led by communists. At that point the nationalist (look up Chinese name for party) divides. Before it had been a coalition and the right wing turns on the left wing. Then there is a massacre of the left wing. Then novel was set in that moment and it really excited my interest in it. The summer after my junior year, I started taking an intensive Chinese language course. Then I continued to study Chinese. I went to the University of California-Berkeley for Graduate school with Modern China as my major field. After a year there I had a year in an exchange program with the Chinese University of Hong Kong. After which I went to Japan with the purpose of simply learning how to read Japanese because that was one of the requirements of the program. People doing Chinese history would at least know how to read Japanese. If you have already studied Chinese and know the characters then you can do that in about a year. Soon after arriving in Japan, I found myself really interested in the society and in the culture and always had some interest in the history. So I switched from modern China to modern Japan.

LB: Are you fluent in Chinese and Japanese?

SV: I certainly was in Chinese at the point that I moved to Japan and after that I really haven't used it. I have a kind of residual knowledge of the language, which in the right circumstances could upgrade. They are very different spoken languages, but have common vocabulary in the written language. So I don't have my oral proficiency or my oral comprehension. My actual speaking ability is pretty elementary now in Chinese.

LB: Moving back to your college years, why did you decide to attend Princeton?

SV: I was put on the waiting list at Harvard. That's a simple answer. I only applied to Harvard and Princeton and I pretty much assumed I would get into Harvard, but I was put on the waiting list. That year they didn't accept anyone on the waiting list to Harvard, so I went to Princeton.

LB: Would you have rather of went to Harvard?

SV: Yes I would have because I spent junior high and high school in Princeton growing up. So I wanted to go away and sort of being in an urban campus.

LB: You said your father worked at Princeton, correct?

SV: Yes he was a professor of philosophy.

LB: Is that why you kind of wanted to get away?

SV: Not particularly, it was more of wanting to be away from home, but universities are big enough that I never particularly self-conscious about having my father there. There are lots of faculty members.

LB: What were you involved in there?

SV: Well my major was history and I had been interested in history pretty much from grade school on. I have found that all of the way through, that history is probably the thing that I most enjoyed studying. So I was pretty certain when I started my undergraduate that I would be a history major. I didn't anticipate necessarily getting a Ph.D. and becoming a history professor at all. As I said my career goal was initially to go into the foreign service. Then I thought well maybe I will go to law school. The turn in my career happened simply because I became really interested in first Chinese and then Japanese history. Then studying the languages and being in these different cultures and societies. That then led to a Ph.D. that then lead to a job here.

LB: When you went to college it was kind of at the beginning of the Vietnam War getting kicked off, is that correct?

SV: Not quite. I started in '62. It becomes an issue at the Princeton campus in 1963 when the wife of the then President of South Vietnam came to visit. She was invited by the public

affairs student group. It was at this time throughout the time of her visit, there were demonstrations in South Vietnam by several opposition groups, but the most prominent were by Buddhist groups. Shortly before, a couple of weeks before she arrived there was a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire to protest. It is very famous. There was a small group of students who I wasn't affiliated with, but who organized a protest. I remember going to that protest.

LB: So you didn't help organize it, but took part in it?

SV: Not that one, no.

LB: Oh okay, because I do know later on that you did help organize a demonstration as a protest against President Johnson dispatching the first American ground forces to Vietnam.

SV: Yes, well actually it was in connection with that, but the demonstration was in the spring of 1966, so that was about a year after he sends the first American ground forces. The occasion for the demonstration was the visit to the Princeton Campus of President Johnson to inaugurate the new building called the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy or International Studies. I'm not sure what it is called. So myself and three or four other people organized the first kind of large anti-war demonstration on the campus at Princeton. I think that was in April or maybe May of '66.

LB: Did your interest in Asian studies have any reason as to why you protested?

SV: Oh, certainly it did. By that time I had studied a fair amount of East Asian history. I was very much aware of the history of Western colonialism in East Asia and Southeast Asia in the case of Vietnam. I had read enough about the history of Vietnam to know that the anti-colonial nationalism was too powerful of a force to successfully resist with a foreign intervention. Secondly, countries have a right to self-determination. We don't particularly like who the leaders are if they have popular support, which Ho Chi Minh and the communists certainly did because they had led the successful war against the French. Then you have to live with that.

LB: Aside from the demonstrations, do you have any favorite memory from your college years or funny stories you would like to share? Anything memorable.

SV: Nearly flunking symbolic logic.

LB: What was that class?

SV: It was a course in symbolic logic. It was offered in the philosophy department. The department that my father was in. I thought it would be kind of interesting and good academic, intellectual training. It was a lecture course and I attended the first three or four weeks and it seemed kind of self-evident. There was a quiz, I did fine on the quiz. Then I pretty much stopped going and stopped studying. Then when the mid-term came and I tried to start catching up a few days before I realized that I just couldn't do it. It was too much. It's like a foreign language in a sense. It is step by step. I remember the professor after the mid-term said, "well the grades on the mid-term range from 127 points to 37 points or whatever it was. I was the 37, so I had the lowest grade in the class. I thought that was pretty funny.

LB: You mentioned your father, was he not a very well-known philosopher?

SV: Yes, yes of Western philosophy, ancient Greece.

LB: Do you think his prominence influenced you at all to have publications?

SV: Well in terms of, I mean I wasn't conscious at the time of an effect on my career choice. Obviously, I grew up in an academic family. Most of my family, friends and a number of my friends were academics or sons and daughters of academics. So it was a world that I felt completely comfortable in. when I decided to go to Graduate school in history it seemed like the obvious thing to do. There wasn't any sort of question in my mind "what would this be like?" having grown up within an academic family. I had come to appreciate a number of things about that life. I saw it as a valuable, individual interest and social value. So I don't know if my father had been a businessman if that would have made any difference, I don't know.

LB: What made you decide to come to the University of Iowa?

SV: In 1974 to '75, I was starting to write my history dissertation. I had written maybe a chapter or two and I was actually planning on applying for jobs. Out of the blue I received a phone from Mr. Henry Horowitz who was then in the department. He asked me if I would be interested in being interviewed for a job at Iowa. First off, I was somewhat flattered. Secondly, I thought it would be good experience for next year. So I came and I really liked

the people here. There was a kind of cohort of Asian historians. We were about the same age. It was myself, Paul Greenough, he is in the department, Professor Arkush who retired a couple years ago. There were several other recently hired assistant professors in other fields. The Asian language of literature people were about the same age as me. So there was this kind of cohort of people of whom I liked a lot personally. I immediately liked them. We had sort of overlapping interests. So I had a really great experience here. I decided to accept the job, on the condition it started a year later because I knew that I wasn't far enough along to be able to finish before I started teaching. It was not wise to start a full time job. So they said yes. Then, I started teaching here in the fall of 1976.

LB: At the time was it your plan to make the University of Iowa your home for this long?

SV: No, it wasn't. I wasn't thinking very long term and at the time Iowa City was a much smaller town than it is now. It's not like a major city now. It has a micro urban center to it. After graduate school at Berkeley, which was a part of the San Francisco area, then I was at Hong Kong for a year and then between my graduate program, I spent four years in Tokyo. I had really become very accustomed to it, I like urban. So that was what I was expecting. I continued to enjoy teaching here. Iowa City became an increasingly attractive place to live. Then there was a point in either 1989 or 1990 there were two open rank positions. By that time I had tenure and I was promoted to full rank of professor. One was at Madison and one was at University of California-Irvine. I applied for both jobs and was a finalist for both jobs, but I didn't get either offer. That was sort of the last time that I tried to leave.

LB: Were there any specific reasons as to why you wanted to leave?

SV: Well, I guess there are two things. The main thing is that although the history department in the mid-1970s made the commitment to Asian history and at the same time the administration hired some people to teach the language and some literature. The commitment remained very limited compared to comparable universities. I came as and will probably remain the only Japan historian. Wisconsin had two, Michigan probably had three, and we might have been the only Big Ten department with just a single China historian and single Japan historian. This campus is very slow and very behind in internationalizing, in terms of faculty expertise. That was the biggest frustration, not being in a place where it is the major center for Japanese studies. Which Wisconsin was, Michigan would have been, Berkeley certainly was, even UC-Irvine. They started late, but they were already going to be well ahead of where Iowa was.

LB: I know you secured a 2 million dollar grant for four years to support the undergrad education on Asia. How did you secure such a large grant to help out with the studies?

SV: Well, there was a donor, actually a remarkable family, named Freeman. He and his father helped to start up or was one of the principals in this really big international firm, AIG. When the son retired with a bunch of stock, he established a foundation with the purpose of promoting an understanding in exchange between the US and East Asia. They announced a competition and in the year after I became the director of the center for Asian studies, and what you could write into the grant would be initial funding for what would become tenure track positions and I realized at that point that the only way the administration was going to keep East Asia going as an enterprise would be to have external funding. So I spent a lot of time and effort with help from colleagues in putting together a proposal that turned out to be successful.

LB: So the money went toward helping to pay for-

SV: Well, there was three positions faculty wise. One was modern Chinese Lit, one was Japanese Religion, and one was a Second Japanese Lit position.

LB: Going back to the Vietnam War, you offered a class called the Vietnam War and Historical Perspectives?

SV: Yes. I think it's still in the books.

LB: Is it able to be offered still?

SV: I developed it and I taught it for six or seven years and then it became a topic offered under historical perspectives. And for a number of years there were people who were teaching it I'm not sure if it still is. But at the time it was one of the early courses. So that became a teaching area and I did some publishing on that as well.

LB: What was the primary reason why you offered the class?

SV: I discovered when I was in Japan on research leave from 1979 to 1980 and I came back, I discovered that those students in my history class, I forget which one it was, really had no idea or knew almost nothing about the war. It already kind of faded, which kind of makes sense because if they were freshman or sophomore, the war ended in '75 but most of the

American troops came home in ’73. So, sometime when they were in Junior High School. Not many Junior High School students pay attention to the international politics or events. But it’s still kind of a shock to me. Then 1980 was the year Ronald Reagan was elected president and part of his platform was making America great again with the subtext of overcoming the defeat, so he described it as a noble cause. And then there were a number of Vietnam War movies in a way of America winning. So that struck me with the idea that there’s a real need to have people understand what the history of Vietnam before the US intervened was and what actually happened in the war itself which was very complicated and it was being simplified in a way that, to me, seemed to be ignoring all the risks and cost that come along with that kind of intervention; The most recent example being Iraq. How many American lives? How much money? What good came to it? Iraq was more cynical. They knew there were no weapons of mass destruction. But also in the initial stage of the Vietnam War, with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which was the “authorizing resolution” based on misrepresentation, somewhat based on incomplete information, but sometimes because it was necessary to make the case that America had been attacked so we have to respond. There was just too much going on at the time that I felt an obligation to at least provide a counter-narrative to.

LB: Your class received national attention it seems like because I read the New York Times article.

SV: You did?

LB: Yes, I did. It was very interesting. They had a nice photo of you with some of your students. They looked very serious in the photo.

SV: It was very interesting to have a professional photographer and he was here for a full day. He must’ve taken five hundred photographs. Some in the lecture hall, in the discussion and then in the end of the discussion section, which I was also teaching, he asked if it would be possible to have some of the students come back after class because he didn’t think he got it quite right. So then he had us sort of pose. There was me, the board and the students. And he probably took the photographs, just clicked the camera for about twenty minutes and then he’d say “oh yeah it’s starting to get a little better.” It’s interesting kind of how the eye of the photographer and trying to capture visually a mood and not just expressions. It’s a great photograph.

LB: Was it exciting for you to be in the New York Times and receive attention?

SV: Yeah, it was, it was kind of a thrill.

LB: Did it help out with your attention for studies or attention towards the university or you as a professor?

SV: No. Now they'd make a big deal out of it. There'd be much more. The whole publicity scene in the university is much more advanced they it was then. The university wasn't particularly concerned with the public engagement the way it certainly has been the last decade or last five years. So nobody in the administration commented on it. Now at the time, I think the New York Time wasn't as readily available as it was now so that might've been part of it. No electronic version. You either got a solid hard copy.

LB: Do you still have a hard copy of it?

SV: Yeah, I do actually.

LB: Just curious out of some years of past, has your opinion on the Vietnam War ever changed from when you were a student to now? Have you realized any new information that would maybe alter it?

SV: I'd say that in terms of my understanding of the internal dynamics of the communist forces is now clearer to me than it was at the time that the North Vietnamese were playing a larger role than I'd assumed at the time. It wasn't that the resistance in the south was essential. The war wouldn't have had the same outcome without it. But particularly after the Tet Offensive of '68, the relative weight of North Vietnamese regular soldiers as opposed to South Vietnamese irregulars shifted rather dramatically. And when I was teaching the courses I was sort of aware of that but it wasn't as clear to me as it is now. The role of China in the war was also not as clear. That and the way the role of China flipped because of the Soviets. So the international politics of it were not as understood. In terms of the basic understanding of the war, it hasn't changed. I understand it in terms of anti-colonial nationalism. Internal poitics in South Vietnam that were defined by the colonial experience. So that the people, both the status of the communist party and its leadership and how they were viewed, not by everybody, but generally viewed was inseparable of the role as the successful leaders in the war against France. And there's nothing the US could really do to change that fact. The second thing was that the various political military and social groups that the US tried to build a non-communist government around were limited in their capacity to create a nation-state. The ones that went against the military were seen as siding with the French. There was

the Vietnamese Catholic population who was anti-communist and had saw that under communist government they'd have restricted religious freedom. There was also the minority population that was kind of a self-enclosed community and that was the basis of the government. That limited their capacity to create an alternative state. Nation building rarely ever happens successfully under those conditions. Two things: one is you can choose your enemies, but you can't choose your clients. You see this in Afghanistan with Karzai. Everyone's pulling their hair out because he's not doing what's in the best interest in the country. But once you elect a leader of this client state, what are you going to do? You can assassinate them, but then you have the next guy who has his own interests and loyalties and it's probably not going to work.

LB: Looking at your books or publications that you've written over the years, which one was your favorite to research?

SV: Favorite to research was definitely my first book. It was the first time I actually was writing something that was, not 100% but for the most part, data contained in unedited documents. I was actually working with original documents and having to decide what story they tell, how the data fit together, and what they mean. I think the first time you do that there's a certain kind of excitement that made it the most fun to research. I did my research for my dissertation for two years in Japan. That was the only thing I was doing on fellowships. Didn't have competing demands, didn't have to teach, and didn't have a family.

LB: Sounds like an easy time.

SV: I could really kind of become engrossed in it.

LB: Did it allow you to become engrossed in it even more?

SV: Absolutely, yeah.

LB: You said earlier that you like sports, I heard you have season ticket for Iowa football and basketball.

SV: Right. Those are two college sports I really enjoy. Even though I don't make a point of watching it when I have the opportunity, I sort of like wrestling too. Although I must say that the relentless role of big money is leeching my interest a bit. I still enjoy it, but every single second is filled up with some promotion or something. There is this constant

relentless dim, either the public announcer or the lights flashing. It's just; it's increasingly taking away the pleasure. It wasn't that long ago where there's a timeout and it was quiet, right? You could talk to the person next to you.

LB: Really? I don't think I've been to a sporting event that's been like that.

SV: The first season tickets were in Ferentz's second year and during time-out they didn't have all this stuff. They didn't have the burrito thing. The cam camera. It's as if the game isn't enough. You know? People have to be entertained every single minute. My wife and I actually go to a number of the women's games. It's still the same, just not quite as intense, the Women's basketball games.

LB: Just how good are your seats, also?

SV: They're not good enough. The football, actually I'm going to give them up. I'm not going to get them next year because I've had them for maybe twelve years. Initially they weren't all they good and then they got a little better, but they didn't really improve so from where I'm sitting, which is about five yards deep in the end zone on row 19, about I can see everything pretty well that's from the fifty yard line because that's where the seats are, but when it gets beyond the fifty yard line, the angle, distortion of that, and when it gets to the west sideline, you just don't see anything at all. And then sometimes two rows down, there's a guy that's 6'6", two seats over and you kind of have to look around him even though I'm six feet. It's gotten to be too much. I'm still interested in it, but during all the TV time outs I'd rather get up and go get a drink.

LB: You don't think you could press the University for some box seats or something?

SV: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. And the other thing is that I don't mind that they've raised the price of tickets, that's okay, but in order to improve my seats, I have to give all this money to the athletic department and that's the last thing I'm ever going to do. They don't need it.

LB: No, funny how they don't, I would say. So in your future, how long do you plan on staying here or?

SV: I'm going to go on to half-time teaching next year and at this point I'm planning on retiring in spring semester of 2018. It might be a year earlier. I don't know, but that's the plan. So I would've taught here for 42 years. It's a long time.

LB: Consistency's always good. Alright, I think that wraps up our questions. Anything else you'd like to mention?

SV: I'll say that the one thing that really hasn't changed from my first year to now is how positive I feel about the department as a whole. It's really…I don't know if it's unique, but even though the personnel has changed, it's maintained a kind of culture in which people are deeply respectful of each other. They're friendly, people are friendly, but there isn't a compulsion to be friends. People respect each other's individual needs. There are kind of shared values having to do with the liberal arts and their value. It's been, from colleagues from other institutions, it's been remarkably free of factionalism or personality conflicts or other things that can kind of just suck a lot of what's positive about being a member of the department out of it. I'd say that the one thing I have no reservations about is the community of colleagues I've been a part of and will be until I retire.

LB: I guess I have one more question then. In the coming years when you're thinking about leaving do you feel comfortable leaving the department, then? Do you think it will still continue to be positive?

SV: Absolutely. The department has been able to be in the college and the college has been in the university and the university is under the state regents and they get their money from the state legislature and things that are happening at those levels are not particularly good in terms of how resources are being allocated, in terms of the bureaucracy, a lot of time that faculty and administration just wants to spend money on things which has no meaning or consequence. That's all stuff that'll probably not get any better, but that probably applies to any university in the country. I have a great deal of confidence that the people in the department are going to maintain those things that the people value. So, I have no fears at all of what's going to happen after I leave.

LB: Well, thank you for your time, I appreciate it.

SV: It was nice talking to you.

LB: I had a wonderful time.

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