BOSCH ARCHIVAL SEMINAR FOR YOUNG HISTORIANS, 2011

AMERICAN HISTORY IN TRANSATLANTIC PERSPECTIVE

Archival seminar in Chicago, Madison, Boston, and Washington DC, September 4-16, 2011. Co-organized by the GHI Washington, the University of Chicago’s Department of History, and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, with the generous support of the Robert Bosch Foundation. Conveners: Mischa Honeck (Heidelberg Center for American Studies/GHI) and Martin Klimke (GHI). Participants: Anja-Maria Bassimir (University of Münster), Jasmine Noelle Yarish (University of California, Santa Barbara), Martin Deuerlein (University of Tübingen), Clayton Cleveland (University of Oregon), Agnes Kneitz (University of Munich), Lisa Maurer (University of Nebraska), Clemens Immanuel Schmidt (University of Leipzig), Christopher Parcels (University of Massachusetts), Florian Plum (Free University of Berlin), Kevin Kosanovich (College of William and Mary).

After premiering successfully in 2010, the Bosch Foundation Archival Seminar for Young Historians convened for the second time in September 2011. Once again the tour spanned four cities (Chicago, Madison, Boston, and Washington DC), and the ten seminar participants from Germany and the United States were introduced to the holdings and policies of a broad spectrum of American archives and research libraries. The goal of the seminar was to prepare doctoral students from both countries working in diverse fields of American history for their prospective research trips; to teach them how to contact archives, use finding aids, and identify important reference tools; and to help them gain a greater appreciation of the various kinds of archives and special collections located in the United States.

The Bosch Archival Seminar 2011 kicked off with a historical walking tour of downtown Chicago on Labor Day, September 5. The following day was set aside for the opening thesis workshop at the University of Chicago hosted by Kathleen Neils Conzen and attended by members of the history department and graduate student body. The seminar participants, who had been grouped into five transatlantic tandems consisting each of one German and one American student, commented on the work of their respective partners, exposed their projects to academic scrutiny, and received valuable feedback from their peers and present faculty members. On Wednesday, September 7,
the Seminar met Daniel Greene, Director of the William M. Scholl Center of American History and Culture at the Newberry Library, for a day-long introduction to the Institute’s collections as well as for a general overview of American archival policies and practices. Among the topics discussed were the purchase of rare books, techniques for browsing manuscript collections, the use of maps for historical research, and the opportunities and pitfalls of digitization. On Thursday morning, before the group departed for Madison, Wisconsin, the seminar visited the Cook County Court Archives. In his presentation, which was both instructive and entertaining, court archivist Phil Costello demonstrated how historians could make creative use of legal records and court cases.

The seminar’s first destination in Madison was the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Chief archivists Michael Edmonds and Harry Miller welcomed the seminar participants in the morning hours of September 9. They spoke about the history and holdings of their institution within the broader context of American state historical societies and impressed the students with the Wisconsin State Historical Society’s dedication to accessibility and public education. After that, time was set aside for individual research before the group reassembled at the University of Wisconsin history department for a roundtable on the relationship between historical research and political intervention. Under the guidance of faculty members William Reese and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen as well as independent scholar and bibliographer James Danky, the participants engaged in a spirited dialogue about whether historians not only have a right to address issues of contemporary relevance but should feel obliged to use their expert knowledge to shape and elevate public debate. While some identified with a more traditional ideal of the scholar as a disinterested and unbiased observer of the human past, most agreed that historians should engage in wider debates about politics and society to promote various causes or simply challenge the simplistic truth claims of others.

On Saturday evening, September 10, the group arrived in Boston, the third stop on the itinerary. The following morning gave the seminar participants a chance to witness public history in action with a guided tour of the Freedom Trail. After that, the group spent the rest of the day engaged in individual explorations. On Monday, September 12, the seminar resumed at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library at Columbia Point. Enjoying a two-and-a-half-hour tour of the museum and library archives, including the Ernest Hemingway
Collection, under the supervision of Jane Lindsay, the group benefited from staff presentations on audiovisuals, declassification, and the library’s manuscript collections and oral history program. The day concluded with a visit to the Baker Library Archives at the Harvard Business School. Katherine Fox, Associate Director of Public Services, acquainted the students with the wealth of the Baker Library’s holdings, which touch upon almost every issue pertaining to the country’s economic development from an agricultural society to an industrial and postindustrial superpower. The seminar returned to Harvard University the next morning. The first stop was Schlesinger Library, one of the leading U.S. research facilities for women’s history. Head librarian Ellen Shea showed and explained letters, pamphlets, books, and visual material related to topics ranging from domesticity and black women to the women’s suffrage movement. The final destination on our Boston schedule was Houghton Library, where Peter Accardo talked the group through some of the library’s most precious Early Americana collections and gave valuable advice on how to use them for various research agendas.

After reaching Washington DC late on Tuesday, September 13, the Bosch Seminar continued the following day at the Library of Congress. A guided tour of the Jefferson building was followed by a presentation from archivist Daun van Ee, who spoke to the participants about the breadth of manuscript collections available through the Library of Congress Manuscript Division. The group then advanced to the Prints and Photographs Division, where Sara Duke and her coworkers had worked hard to muster illustration samples related to the participants’ individual projects, thereby underscoring the significance of visual material for historical research. In the afternoon, the group was welcomed by Matthew Wasniewski from the Office of the Historian of the House, who gave the seminar participants a detailed tour of Congress and explained the work of his office, which provides information on the history of Congress, as well as congressional documents and legislation, and chronicles its composition and individual members.

On Thursday, September 15, the group visited the Center for Legislative Archives at the National Archives and Records Administration. Historian Richard McCulley introduced the participants to the different types of legislative records of Congress, e.g. committee or investigative records. Drawing on the Investigation into Stock Exchange Practices (Pecora Investigation) by the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking
and Currency set up in March 1932 to explore the Wall Street crash of 1929 as a case study, McCulley presented a variety of research strategies for specific aspects and source material. After that, the group moved to the Treasure Vault to see a plethora of historically significant documents, such as a copy of Washington’s First Inaugural Address, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s reading copy of his message asking Congress to declare war against Japan (“Day of Infamy” Address), as well as the enlarged copy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Next, the group was welcomed, over lunch, at the American Historical Association (AHA) by Executive Director James Grossman and Interim Special Projects Coordinator Julia Brookins. They explained the job situation for historians in the U.S., elaborated on the various efforts of the AHA to reach out to graduate students and young scholars, and engaged the participants in a stimulating debate about their own experiences, plans, and perspectives on both sides of the Atlantic. Following this fruitful discussion, Associate Curator and Archivist Craig Orr received the seminar at the National Museum of American History. Orr presented a detailed picture of the museum collections that have a strong emphasis on the history of technology, advertising, marketing, entrepreneurship, as well as American music, among other fields. He successfully demonstrated how many of the participants would find suitable source material for their topics in the museum’s extensive holdings and offered specific advice and contacts for them to follow up.

Due to the damage incurred by a recent earthquake, the visit to the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center planned for Friday, September 16, had to be canceled. In the afternoon, the group met for a wrap-up discussion of the seminar at the German Historical Institute and was greeted by Deputy Director Uwe Spiekermann, who introduced them to the institute’s work, research projects, as well as the many fellowship and networking opportunities. The farewell dinner that evening concluded a very successful seminar, whose participants were extremely grateful for the useful information, contacts, and prospects for future collaboration that it opened up for them.

Mischa Honeck (GHI) and Martin Klimke (GHI)