BOSCH FOUNDATION ARCHIVAL SEMINAR FOR YOUNG HISTORIANS 2012: AMERICAN HISTORY IN TRANSATLANTIC PERSPECTIVE

Archival seminar in Chicago, Madison, Boston, and Washington DC, September 2-14, 2012. Co-organized by the German Historical Institute 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. Convener: Mischa Honeck (GHI). Participants: Amanda Brickell Bellows (University of North Carolina), Mahshid Mayar (University of Bielefeld), Kritika Agarwal (University of New York, Buffalo), Robert Fischer (University of Erfurt), Michelle D. Tiedje (University of Nebraska), Markus Huber (University of Munich), Scott Krause (University of North Carolina), Stefanie Eisenhuth (Humboldt University, Berlin), Ava Purkiss (University of Texas, Austin), Philipp Reick (Free University, Berlin), Peter Theiner (Robert Bosch Foundation).

The Bosch Foundation Archival Seminar convened for the third consecutive time in September 2012. 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. As in previous years, 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 seminar kicked off with the traditional historical walking tour of downtown Chicago on Labor Day, September 3. The following day was set aside for the opening thesis workshop at the University of Chicago hosted by Kathleen Neils Conzen, Jane Dailey, and other members of the history department. 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 5, the Seminar met Daniel Greene, Director of the William M. Scholl Center of American History
and Culture at the Newberry Library, for a daylong 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 expedience of maps for historical research, and the opportunities and pitfalls of digitalization. On Thursday morning, before the group departed for Madison, Wisconsin, the seminar visited the Cook County Court Archives. In his lively and instructive presentation, court archivist Phil Costello demonstrated how historians could make creative use of legal records and court cases.

Our 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 7. 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 local University of Wisconsin history department for a roundtable discussion that focused on comparative, transnational, and global approaches in American history. Under the guidance of faculty members Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, John Tortorice, and independent scholar and award-winning bibliographer James Danky, the participants engaged in a spirited dialogue about the methodological potentials and challenges of posing historical questions that transcend national boundaries. While the participants agreed that not every topic lends itself to global analysis, there was little doubt that transnational history provided the tools not only for connecting the United States to the rest of the world, but also to facilitate the exchange of ideas between American and European historians of the U.S.

On Saturday evening, September 8, the group landed in Boston, the third stop on our 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 10, the seminar resumed at Harvard University. The first of three research libraries on our schedule was Houghton Library, where Peter Accardo walked 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. The seminar then
moved on to Schlesinger Library, one of the leading U.S. research facilities for women’s history. Ellen Shea showed and explained letters, pamphlets, books, and visual material related to topics ranging from domesticity and black women to the female suffrage movement. 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 impressive scope 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. Our sojourn in Boston drew to a close the next morning when we drove to Columbia Point to see the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Enjoying a two-and-a-half hour tour of the museum and library archives under the supervision of Stephen Plotkin, the group benefited from staff presentations on audiovisuals, declassification, and the library’s manuscript collections and oral history program.

After reaching Washington DC in the late afternoon of Tuesday, September 11, the seminar continued the following day at the Library of Congress. Peter Theiner from the Robert Bosch Foundation joined the group for the last three days of the Seminar. 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 13, the group visited the Center for Legislative Archives at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington DC. Historian Richard McCulley welcomed the group and introduced them to David Langbart, who is the top archivist responsible for State Department records. In his orientation, Langbart explained the structure of the National Archives and ways to access source material pertaining to the history of U.S. foreign policy. Next,
Executive Director James Grossman and Interim Special Projects Coordinator Julia Brookins welcomed the group to the American Historical Association (AHA) for a brown-bag lunch. They drew the students into a vibrant debate over the ethical stakes involved in the study and teaching of history, touching on issues of plagiarism, civility, access to sources, trust, and truth-claims. Following this fruitful discussion, the group met with two curators at the National Museum of American History, William Yeingst and Bonnie Campbell Lilienfeld. The students appreciated this session because it pointed them to another potential career path for young historians. Learning a lot about decisions that are made in putting together an exhibition, the objects chosen, and how to translate research into information the public can readily grasp, the students recognized the highly political and contested nature that history assumes when it leaves the purely academic sphere.

On Friday, September 14, the seminar put in a final stop at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, where Ida Jones introduced the participants to the Center’s remarkable array of collections on African American history and culture. In the afternoon, the group met for a wrap-up discussion at the German Historical Institute. They were greeted by Deputy Director Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, whose presentation focused on 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.

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