
Symposium at the German Historical Institute Washington, April 1-2, 2016. Conveners: Mischa Honeck (GHI) and Jan C. Jansen (GHI). Participants: Cemil Aydin (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Thomas Bender (New York University), Hartmut Berghoff (University of Göttingen), Linda Colley (Princeton University), Elisabeth Engel (GHI), Jim Grossman (American Historical Association), Jo Guldi (Brown University), Bryan Hart (GHI), Madeleine Herren (University of Basel), Jürgen Kocka (Free University of Berlin), Simone Lässig (GHI), John McNeill (Georgetown University), Vanessa Ogle (University of Pennsylvania), Lutz Raphael (University of Trier), Anne Schenderlein (GHI), Jeremi Suri (University of Texas, Austin), Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI).

The symposium “The Historian and the World — The Worlds of History” was unlike most academic events held at the GHI. Rather than engage with a particular topic or problem, this two-day conference asked leading representatives of the historical profession on both sides of the Atlantic to step back from their specific research agendas and reflect on the current state of the discipline and its relationship to the broader public. Inspired by recent metahistorical interventions such as Jo Guldi’s and David Armitage’s History Manifesto or Lynn Hunt’s Writing History in the Global Era, the symposium used the ascent of larger frames of historical analysis such as global history, “big data,” and the return of the long durée as the linchpin for probing the extent to which recent methodological developments have reignited older debates about the professional and public “relevance” of academic history.

The first panel, “Genealogy and Contexts,” traced some of these paradigm shifts and their impact on the discipline by interrogating the reasons for as well as the consequences of the increasing interest in “connectivity” in historical research. In her paper, “From the Age of Revolutions to Eras of Global Warfare: Shifting Perceptions and Connections,” Linda Colley made a strong case for demonstrating that global history can change and challenge established ideas. In her case study, she located the rise of modern forms of empire and globalization in the history of multi-regional warfare. Drawing on the violent conflicts involving Europeans, Africans, and Asians during the Age
of Revolutions, Colley suggested new ways of appreciating the imperial roots and anti-imperial echoes of present-day global history approaches. Hartmut Berghoff shifted the focus to how processes of marketization have influenced scholarly and non-scholarly practices within the historical profession. Paradigm shifts, Berghoff argued in his paper “The Historical Profession between Marketization and Academic Values,” have at least as much to do with branding and repackaging in the name of innovation as with the pursuit of original research. While historians cannot thrive outside the market for grants, jobs, and prestige, Berghoff maintained that it was still their task to enrich public discourse, particularly by contradicting false claims and myths.

The second panel, “Gains and Losses,” tackled the benefits and risks of privileging the study of broader, potentially global horizons over traditional approaches such as those that focus on regions, nations, and particular groups. Presenting an overview of the work conducted at the Institute of European Global Studies in Basel, Madeleine Herren advocated pursuing a kind of global history that is concerned with historicizing borders and connections rather than expanding geographies. Her paper, “Connecting Scales: Global Perspectives in the Historiography of the Twenty-first Century,” thus placed special emphasis on re-narrating the relationships of local and national actors to the wider world through transcultural modes of analysis. Though agreeing with the need to transcend the nation-state in historical scholarship, Jeremi Suri’s paper, “The Limits of System and Structure: Reinserting the Individual in Global Histories,” struck a more hesitant tone. According to Suri, many of the prominent books that have defined the field of global history in Germany and the United States have paid insufficient attention to the agency of individual actors as they struggled to shape and make sense of communities and networks larger than themselves. The biographical element, Suri argued, is necessary to humanize global history and make it appealing, accessible, and ultimately useful.

In his keynote lecture, “The Historian in Times of Globalization: Social Mimicry, Intellectual Potential, and Political Risks,” Lutz Raphael examined the social, political, and historiographical context of the historical profession’s current state. Raphael placed historians at the intersection of three worlds: today’s world of globalization, the changing professional world of historians, and the historians’ past. The current situation, according to him, was marked by a tension between the persistence of nationally organized fields of historical
scholarship and an era of (political, cultural, academic) globalizations that spurred the rise of global history. With respect to the political relevance of the historical profession, Raphael argued that it remained to be seen whether today’s historians would join in an apolitical consensus around values of liberal internationalism or advocate a renewal of nationalist thinking.

The third panel, “Normativity and Reflexivity,” examined the extent to which today’s global historians reflect on their relationship with the present and on the underlying normative assumptions or ideological positions behind newer historiographical trends. Cemil Aydin’s paper, “Why We Need Global History to Respond to Racialized Narratives of Empire, Civilization, and Nation,” presented elements of “Bridging Cultures,” a project funded by the National Endowment for Humanities, which aimed at making the U.S. public more familiar with the complexities of Muslim beliefs and practices. He pointed to the necessity of historicizing tendencies to racialize Islam since the late nineteenth century. In her presentation, “Against Connectivity Talk,” Vanessa Ogle criticized the dominance of flows, connectivity, networks, and movements in the writing of global history, which tends to overshadow the fact that fragmentation and connection were two intrinsically linked processes. Ogle also pointed to the need for archive-based global history studies to balance the wealth of large syntheses and handbooks. John McNeill’s paper, “Global History, Environmental History, and Useful History in the (Alleged) Anthropocene,” focused on three ways to reach a usable and relevant past in the present: larger scales of analysis, which would bring some historians to engage with the ongoing history of globalization; moving beyond textual sources, including bio-archives, geo-archives, and genetics; and the history of the climate, which should not be left to the climatologists. He also made a case for moving beyond textual narration in the presentation of historians’ findings and material.

The fourth panel, “Markets and Audiences,” examined the ways in which historians interact with a broader public and how the new scholarly trends should be integrated into curricula of high schools and other non-academic educational forums. Jo Guldi addressed the question whether historians should concern themselves with current events, even at the risk of jeopardizing their objectivity. Her talk, “The Parasitical Public Intellectual: The Politics of Longue-durée History according to Goldwin Smith,” focused on the historical case of British-American historian Goldwin Smith, who took a longue-durée
approach in dealing with questions of land redistribution in the United States during Reconstruction. According to Guldi, the politicization of history in this case did not harm the objectivity of historical research but made it more rigorous. Jim Grossman's talk, “Everything has a History: Making the Case for History, Historical Thinking, and Historical Work,” discussed historians' strategies for getting people outside academia interested in historical scholarship. Scale, Grossman argued, was not a relevant parameter for the public impact of the historian's work. Instead, historians should convey the central message that everything has a history as a starting point for engaging with a non-academic public.

The fifth and final panel, “Criticisms and Interventions,” addressed the questions of whether global historians have a responsibility to act as public intellectuals, and how recent historiographical developments should mirror historians’ engagement in public affairs. In his talk, “The Historian, the Public, and the Uses of Ambidexterity,” Thomas Bender introduced the concept of ambidexterity to underscore that historians ought to have different communication skills for speaking with different audiences. To establish a foothold in the public sphere, historians need to be able to effectively translate their academic work into less lengthy and convoluted narratives for non-academics without sacrificing too much complexity. For Jürgen Kocka, recent political developments in the United States and Europe have only amplified the need for historians to intervene in current affairs and provide critical contextual knowledge in an age that produces headlines at an ever faster pace and makes it ever more important that historians utilize approaches that go beyond the nation-state. Using German reactions to the refugee crisis, which he conceived as a long-term consequence of German Vergangenheitsbewältigung, as a case in point, he also pointed to the risks in historians’ public interventions. While intervening in current debates, historians should resist self-censorship on moral or ideological grounds.

In the concluding session, Mischa Honeck and Jan Jansen summarized the dominant themes that emerged out of the symposium and offered avenues for further discussion. Aside from calling for the strengthening of cross-disciplinary competence and multi-lingual skills, both in terms of language acquisition and the ability to communicate effectively to scholarly and non-scholarly audiences alike, Honeck and Jansen maintained that today's historians need to avoid an uncritical embrace of global history in favor of a multidimensional,
multi-scalar approach to historical problems. Even as the historical profession remains organized along national lines, multi-scalar competencies are becoming ever more indispensable for historians striving to produce innovative and meaningful scholarship in the twenty-first century.

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