UNCERTAINTY AND RISK IN AMERICA: (UN)STABLE HISTORIES FROM THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD TO THE "GILDED AGE"

Workshop at the John F. Kennedy Institute, Free University of Berlin. June 30 to July 2, 2016. Conveners: Elisabeth Engel (GHI) and Sebastian Jobs (Free University of Berlin). Participants: Sean Cosgrove (Cornell University), Bruce Dorsey (Swarthmore College), Joseph Giacomelli (Cornell University), Michaela Hampf (Free University of Berlin), Martha Hodes (New York University), Jonathan Levy (University of Chicago), Sabine Mischner (University of Freiburg), Simone Müller (University of Freiburg), Sharon Ann Murphy (Providence College), Silvan Niedermeier (University of Erfurt), Lydia Plath (Canterbury University), Eleonora Rohland (University of Bielefeld), Alexander Starre (Free University of Berlin), Olaf Stieglitz (University of Cologne).

While all of us know uncertainties and risks from our daily lives and experience, we know little about their role in history. Historians have hardly inquired how the unknown has shaped subjectivities, social (inter)actions, and institutions at different times and places; nor have they reflected much about their own roles as uncertain narrators, who cope with silences, gaps, and inconsistencies in the effort to construct a comprehensible past. In part, this lacuna is due to the difficulties involved in developing approaches that acknowledge and capture the dynamics of lacking certitude. What are suitable objects of historical investigation? And how do we analyze uncertain sources?

The workshop titled “Uncertainty and Risk in America: (Un)Stable Histories from the Late Colonial Period to the ‘Gilded Age’” brought together scholars from Germany and the United States who addressed this difficulty in a series of case studies from nineteenth-century America. Informed by the hypothesis that uncertainty and risk were linked to specific forms of agency, the participants traced some of their most potent manifestations in the contexts of slavery, American capitalism, westward expansion, war, urbanization, and industrialization. The main trajectory of the investigation concerned the questions of, firstly, how concepts of uncertainty and risk emerged, secondly, how their relationship was defined and altered over time and in space, and, thirdly, how they can serve us as heuristic frameworks.
The workshop started with a panel on the risk of resistance with two papers focusing on slavery in the antebellum South. In his talk, “The Crime of Anonymity: Traces of Rebellion in 1802 North Carolina,” Sebastian Jobs explored the dynamics that a rumor about an impending slave revolt developed in the region. Jobs argued that locals constructed and circulated the narrative of a slave insurrection at a variety of sites, including court testimonies, private letters, and newspaper articles, yet without achieving a consistent story. Studying rumors in their distinct quality of providing information that evades certainty, Jobs emphasized, helps us to understand their narrators’ own emotional and epistemological uncertainties. Lydia Plath’s paper, “The Uncertain Worlds of Poor White Slaveholders and their Slaves in the Antebellum South,” investigated how enslaved people construed their masters’ or mistresses’ poverty as a source of risk and uncertainty. Drawing on interviews with former slaves conducted by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, Plath showed that former slaves were fearful of low quality housing, a lack of clothing, and going hungry. These recollections of their “poor white trash” owners, Plath argued, reveal the importance of the slaveholders’ financial background in how African Americans perceived the perilousness of their enslavement. The panel’s commentator, Alexander Starre, underscored the value for historians to embrace uncertainty not only as an object of the analysis but also as a practice of writing what Bruno Latour called “risky accounts.”

The panel was followed by the workshop’s keynote address, “Radical Uncertainty: The History of an Idea,” delivered by Jonathan Levy. Drawing on Frank Knight’s definition of radical uncertainty as the uncertainties that remain after the risks that can be calculated, Levy traced the origin of the modern economic concept back to the Middle Ages. The genealogy of radical uncertainty, he argued, emerged in tandem with the history of money as a medium of exchange and its distinct capacity to relate an unknowable future to the present.

The second day of the workshop began with a panel on risk and insurance. Elisabeth Engel’s paper, “A Wild, Ungovernable Thing: Constructions of Risk in the Early Republic, 1770s-1840s,” examined the things that became the objects of early insurance. Her analysis of the emerging landscape of material items that were eligible for insurance coverage in North America showed that early businesses were preoccupied with the combustible belongings of the property class. The construction of risk in early American society, Engel
argued, was intimately connected to fire and efforts to maintain an elevated social status. In her paper, “Risky Investments: Banks and Slavery in the Antebellum American South,” Sharon Ann Murphy provided an analysis of the relationship between banking institutions and slavery in Southern finance. Focusing on the Citizen’s Bank of Louisiana, one of the largest plantation banks in the region, she showed that slaves served as collaterals for loans. The risks that were associated with slave collaterals, she argued, were similar to those of any debt contracts. Yet, mortgaged slave property had its specific qualities: creditors could liquidate it more easily, debtors could evade its seizure more easily, and slaveholders could use it to prevent the sale of slaves or the breakup of slave families. Pinpointing additional characteristics of financial instruments directed at securing the future, commentator Olaf Stieglitz drew attention to trust and time as frames of reference for historicizing risk.

The third panel shifted the focus from financial institutions to American engagements with nature. Its theme, risk and environment, was introduced by Eleonora Rohland’s paper, “Hurricane and Slave Revolt? Risk and Uncertainty in New Orleans in 1812.” Conceptualizing the natural disaster of 1812 as a “totalizing event” that revealed fundamental features of society and culture, Rohland explored how an approaching hurricane laid bare the political vulnerability that Louisiana had inherited from its development into a slave society. As Rohland argued, the hurricane coincided with the rise of fears that African slaves could use the storm as an opportunity to overthrow white supremacy. Joseph Giacomelli’s talk, “Uncertainty and Climate Politics in Gilded-Age America,” explored how uncertainties shaped scientific discourses about anthropogenic climate change in the context of American westward expansion. Discussing the depiction of Native Americans and Mormon settlements as “role models” in climate literature, Giacomelli showed how expansionists deployed the scientific uncertainty that prevailed about each group’s impact upon the environment to bolster the advance of empire. In her analysis of the shared themes of these papers, commentator Simone Müller concluded that the construction of environmental risks is inherently anthropocentric and therefore inseparable from questions of materiality, inequality, and power.

The final panel of the day turned to the Civil War era. Sabine Mischner’s talk, “The American Civil War as a Permanent State of Suspense: Uncertainty, Information, and Communication during War,” captured
the difficulties military actors had in acquiring reliable information about the course of the war. Starting with the very question of how battles, victories, and defeats were defined, Mischner exemplified the case by analyzing the decision making processes of the Lincoln administration in the White House and of its generals. Their notorious lack of knowledge, Mischner showed, led to a politically informed military imperative that favored moderate risk-taking over inactivity. In her paper, “The Uncertainty and Risks of Racial Classification in the Nineteenth Century,” Martha Hodes discussed family stories and personal memories as primary sources that help us understand the historical workings of race. Focusing on the example of the family members of a sea captain from the British Caribbean, Hodes demonstrated the multiple and inherently inconsistent ways in which people remembered skin color. The instability of memories and perceptions of racial classifications, she argued, should make historians cautious when they invoke such evidence in their writing. Silvan Niedermeier’s comment pointed out the necessity to consider how communication channels shape the ways in which information is passed on or withheld in the historical analysis.

The last workshop panel focused attention on the link between risk, uncertainty and crime. Bruce Dorsey opened the panel with a talk on “The ’Factory Girl’: Uncertainty and Risk in Working Women’s Lives.” Focusing on the scandalous murder of a young pregnant female factory worker in Massachusetts in 1832, Dorsey explored the deep-seated anxieties that female wage-labor triggered in the context of America’s transition from farming to large-scale manufacturing. His analysis of trial documents revealed that commencing factory work altered women’s relationship to their families and communities, to the marketplace of clothing and consumption as well as the marketplace of courtship, marriage and sexuality — turning each into idiosyncratic and often overlapping sources of gendered risk and uncertainty that helped push the female sex back into the “traditional sphere.” The final paper, “Tales of Jack the Clipper: Narratives of Risk in Gilded-Age Chicago,” delivered by Jean Cosgrove, examined the peculiar crime of snipping off women’s long hair, which spread in industrial cities around the turn of the twentieth century. Arguing that these attacks were framed as sexually motivated assaults on femininity, Cosgrove showed how the tales of “Jack the Clipper” served to police women’s appearance and presence in public space. Cosgrove’s findings prompted historians to reconsider the physical boundaries of a person’s sex beyond their genitals and of sexual
violence beyond rape. While both papers focused on ways in which the risks and uncertainties of industrialization and urbanization were regulating the bodies of young working class women, commentator Michaela Hampf highlighted the clues they provided about women’s agency to pursue independent sexual pleasures, to make new consumer choices, or to explore new hairstyles that emerged out of gendered risks.

The workshop ended with a concluding discussion in which participants addressed the broader patterns and themes that arose from the individual presentations. Risk and uncertainty, this conversation highlighted, offer novel perspectives on historical time periods, actors, and institutions. They foreground the multiplicity and multi-linearity of historical narratives, and gauge the terrains where knowledge was unattainable, unstable, contradictory, speculative, or in denial, and therefore powerful and productive. As a research program, this finding promises to provide the starting point for exploring the intersecting uncertainties of the historical agents, the primary source material, and the historian.

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