

# [Global Histories]

## A student journal

**Review: Global History Student Conference, Freie Universität Berlin, May 2017**

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## Global History Student Conference

### Freie Universität Berlin, May 2017

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#### REVIEWED BY KATHLEEN BURKE

*Kathleen Burke graduated with a joint M.A. in History from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and King's College London, where she specialised in researching global food history of the Portuguese and Dutch empires. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. at the University of Toronto, where she is focusing on developing further productive linkages between global history and food history.*

Three years after its establishment, the annual Global History Student Conference in Berlin remains one of a kind. It is one of the few conferences open to both undergraduate and graduate students in global history, and gives them an opportunity presenting their work to an international audience of peers. At the same time, it provides the responsible student team with the chance to gain experience in holding an academic conference. The Berlin conference has inspired students to organise similar conferences in other European capitals. Spanning two days, the 2017 conference topics covered a range of temporal and geographical spaces and drew students from around 20 different countries. The generous funding offered by the Center for Global History at the Freie Universität (FU) sets it apart from the majority of other student conferences, and gives the organisers the opportunity to widen the geographical range of participants, as well as to refine their experience over the years in running a successful conference.

Three years on, the conference also provided an opportunity to reflect on the state of the art of global history research. For the first time, the conference included thematic workshops on new methodologies such as visual history and digital humanities. This was a welcome addition, and future conferences could look at making the workshops even more praxis-focused. As in previous years, the conference also raised broad questions about global history. While many of these remained unanswered, the quality of the discussions around methodology has deepened over the years of the conference's existence.

The question of methodological Eurocentrism has remained a key theme over the three years. This is a complicated question that a single student conference cannot be expected to answer, but it seems like a preoccupation that will not go away. This reflects, of course, broader institutional structures and trends in which the conference is implicated, but which go far beyond it. Some student participants were critical of the fact that the majority of presenters were from European universities. Of course, a global history student conference held in New Delhi or Shanghai would look completely different, and likely reflect a different set of geographical and institutional biases. Others countered that despite students' own

position in the global hierarchy of universities, they should strive to use sources in non-European languages in their work, in order to develop new non-Eurocentric paradigms. At the same time, the discussion invariably left a few questions unresolved, particularly how the desire to transcend methodological Eurocentrism was a particularly Eurocentric concern, and how different conversations might be taking place in universities outside of the Atlantic.

There was also discussion about whether to ‘mainstream’ gender throughout panel discussions, or to dedicate a separate panel on gender history. While the first two Berlin conferences had separate panels on gender and sexuality, the 2017 edition tried the approach of mainstreaming gender throughout different panels. There are risks and benefits to both approaches. The compartmentalisation of gender history risks reducing it to a side-issue that some academics, for example global economic historians, do not consider relevant to their work. The tendency for some historians to dismiss gender as ‘women’s’ history is related to this, despite the aim of gender history to investigate the production of both masculinities and femininities in a relational sense. The mainstreaming approach has the advantage of avoiding the ‘siloesation’ of gender, but risks trivialising it at the same time. As long as gender inequality remains within academic structures themselves, it is difficult to know which approach carries less risk, but the 2017 conference was a good opportunity to experiment with the mainstreaming approach and reflect on what kinds of messages this sends.

As in any conference, it can be hard to stimulate audience engagement, but perhaps this is especially in global history where the remit of time periods and geographical spaces is so broad. The 2017 conference tried to rectify this by circulating papers to panel members in advance, with the suggestion that speakers draw links to broader methodological themes. Not everyone took up this challenge of course, but chairs made particular efforts to draw out broader implications and link detailed work into larger theoretical debates. This helped to get all the panel members engaged and avoid a situation where only a few panel members had the opportunity to answer questions.

Building on the successful workshops, future iterations of the conference could consider how to share the knowledge acquired by students and staff at FU with a wider audience. For example, students at the FU also run a journal on global history that only accepts student submissions and is peer-reviewed by students. While the keynote lecture discussed the different target audiences of major journals in urban history, a similar kind of review of academic journals would also be useful in global history. Members of the ‘Global Histories’ journal team could also share some of their knowledge about the peer review process and how to get work ready for publication, as this is a mystifying process for most students. There is also considerable faculty expertise on how to position oneself for an aca-

demic career in global history, as well as the differences between the European and US systems, which might also be beneficial for students.

Overall, the 2017 conference was a testament to the hard work of the organisers and the participants. There was a palpable sense of team spirit among the organising committee, which showed through in almost all aspects of the conference. Networking—one of the key aspects of every conference—was also well facilitated, with ample opportunities to mingle over coffee or a post-conference beer. Students with an interest in global history are strongly encouraged to apply, as it gives them an opportunity to showcase their work within a more relaxed context before moving on to larger conferences in their academic career.