

[Global Histories]

A student journal

Review: World History Student Conference, King's College London, May 2017

Author: Dennis Kölling

Stable URL: <http://www.globalhistories.com/index.php/GHSJ/article/view/146>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2017.146>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Oct. 2017), pp. 183–186

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2017 Dennis Kölling



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin

Global Histories: A Student Journal

Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut

Koserstraße 20

14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

World History Student Conference

King's College London, May 2017

REVIEWED BY DENNIS KÖLLING

Dennis Kölling holds an undergraduate degree in North American Studies from the John-F.-Kennedy-Institute at Freie Universität Berlin and is studying in the MA program in Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. He just completed a year abroad at Vanderbilt University. His main research interests include the Global Cold War; (post-)modern cultural history with a focus on meanings of music, and the contemporary history of neoliberal capitalism.

While structural analysis and materialist abstractions from empirical data will “remain indispensable” for historical research, Pankaj Mishra admonishes that “our unit of analysis should also be the *irreducible human being*, his or her fears, desires and resentments.”¹ Still quite fresh from the press in May 2017, the arguments of Mishra’s *Age of Anger* did not only serve for a hot discussion topic at the pre- and post-conference pub-crawls, but the book’s inherent dialectic between structuralism and human agency also provides a good framework for the methodological questions raised at the second World History Student Conference at King’s College London. The question of positionality and the tense relationship between structure and individual were the core themes underlying the many engaging discussions among students and practitioners of global forms of history at the conference.

I was fortunate to visit the conference organized by King’s College History graduate students as part of an ongoing cooperation with our own Global History Student Conference in Berlin. The tightly packed program from 9am until 6pm featured opening remarks by Rhodes Professor of Imperial History Richard Drayton, followed by three sessions of two simultaneous panels. The panels catered to a wide array of fields, namely, the History of Science, Internationalism, Social Movements and Ideology, Experiencing the Other, Urban History, and Labor History. The conference was concluded with a methodological roundtable which reflected upon the preceding panels and presented ideas and concepts to rethink how to write histories of global entanglement.

From the very beginning, the opening remarks of Professor Drayton emphasized the need to critically reflect on the methodologies of Global and World History. He cautioned that the terms “global, transnational, and intercultural” have been used inflationary in academia, and that historians should create connected narratives instead of compiling “lists of examples” which supposedly demonstrate a global reach. Global History after all should not become a federation of individ-

¹ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2017). 35.

ual national histories and area studies, but should develop its own clearly articulated set of methods and frameworks. When making his case, Professor Drayton touched upon the themes of positionality, and the relationship between structure and agency: historians should stay aware of who writes historical narratives. Furthermore, they should go beyond creating structural accounts of globality and rediscover how the local, national, and regional levels have been entangled at all times. In this way, Professor Drayton also stressed the revisionist character of a global historical perspective by emphasizing the need of rethinking and realigning existing historical narratives in addition to writing “new” ones.

Many of the presentations given by students offered further food for thought that went beyond the level of case studies into the methodological conception of historical writing. This was widely reflected in the reactions from the audience: the three or four short ten-minute presentations on each panel were followed by lively discussions with attendants that often revolved around quintessential questions underlying the recent discourse on World History and Global History such as: how to differentiate between World History, Global History, and Transnational History? How does a transnational or global perspective change the narratives that historians produce? Does a global narrative automatically privilege structural analysis and how can we reintegrate individual human agency into seemingly dehumanized transnational networks? And, simply, how to overcome the language barriers that condition every global historical study?

The wide array of topics presented by the panel participants reflected the diversity of approaches to World History and served as a prime inspiration for discussions, for which the conference organizers had allotted a fair amount of time. The presentations of Wei Yi Leow and Martina Schiavon on the first panel ‘the History of Science’ were representative for the different levels of agency in global narratives: Presenting on “Science as an agent of coloniality” and examining a case study of rubber research in British Malaya, Leow strongly emphasized human relations underlying historical processes and ‘followed’ individual actors on the ground. Schiavon, on the other hand, presented a very structural approach to “Health, environmental justice, and racism” privileging international and transnational networks over individual actors. In a later panel on Social Movements and Ideology, Wolfgang Thiele combined such a structural approach and the method of following actors. In his presentation on “The discourse of Taiwanese nationalism in the era of decolonization and civil rights,” he analyzed both the structural level of discourse as well as the activities of individual writers and editors of nationalist journals.

The many questions that arose in the panel discussions were then again picked up on the concluding roundtable, along with a presentation of Microhistory and Big Data analysis as new pathways for World History. This setting served for a fruitful discussion and reiterated the dialectic of structure and humanism in the

writing of global histories by juxtaposing the ‘following’ of individual actors in Microhistory with the anonymous mass of Big Data as a source for contemporary historians.

In a final methodological remark, the convenor of the Master’s program in World History and Cultures at King’s College, Dr. Christine Mathias, urged students to continue to reflect upon chances and challenges of revising traditional history writing by incorporating transnational and global perspectives. However, she also closed with some words of caution that might serve as an inspiration to global and world historians beyond the conference: instead of a fetishization of networks and movement within these transnational spaces, she wishes to see more global accounts on those actors that remain static, that do not move across the globe, and that do not form extensive networks, yet are still shaped by the forces of globalization.

The second World History Student Conference at King’s College proved a success in facilitating a viable exchange between practitioners of various global historical approaches on the student level. The conference underlined the importance and fruitfulness of bringing students into discussions surrounding methods and concepts of the relatively broadly defined field of World History. Ultimately, the experience in London also emphasized the need for students to self-organize means for academic exchange in the early stages of a potential academic career and to establish connections and exchange of know-how between projects of this kind to create a platform for creative, transnational dialogue and cooperation inspiring the writing of global narratives. Following the opening remarks of Professor Drayton who stated that “conferences are among the best things in academia,” I argue that students should take the organization of such opportunities increasingly into their own hands. The World History Student Conference at King’s College has shown the feasibility of such endeavor and the chances arising from it.