

[Global Histories]

A student journal

Review: Introduction to the History of Concepts: Annual Workshop for Graduate Students, Helsingin Yliopisto, August 2017

Author: Sébastien Tremblay

Stable URL: <http://www.globalhistories.com/index.php/GHSJ/article/view/152>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2017.152>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Oct. 2017), pp. 187–190

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2017 Sébastien Tremblay



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.

Introduction to the History of Concepts: Annual Workshop for Graduate Students

Helsingin Yliopisto, August 2017

REVIEWED BY SÉBASTIEN TREMBLAY

Sébastien Tremblay holds a M.A. in Global History from the Freie Universität and Humboldt-Universität in Berlin and a B.A. in History and German Studies from the Université de Montréal in Canada. His master thesis explored the impact of US military occupation on ideas of masculinities and the persecution of homosexualites in the early German Federal Republic. His present dissertation project looks at the gay and lesbian transnational and transatlantic cultural communication networks from the 1970s to the 1990s and focuses on the ‘Pink Triangle’ as a marker of identity in LGBTQI+ activist circles.

For two full weeks in August 2017, Helsinki—one of Europe’s most liveable cities and the capital of Finland—invited the world to enjoy the Baltic, the last of the summer breezes, and its annual summer school on the University of Helsinki’s downtown campus, a jewel of Fin de Siècle architecture and home to one of Northern Europe’s most celebrated institutions of higher education. The international board of ‘Concepta,’ the International Research School in Conceptual History and Political Thought, used the occasion to organize its annual workshop on conceptual history for graduate students in conjunction with the University. The lucky participants were welcomed with typical Finnish charm and sense of hospitality and encouraged to discuss their own projects and get a crash course on the work of Reinhart Koselleck, Quentin Skinner, and Kari Palonen, to name but a few.

From the beginning, the eclectic composure of the group mirrored the plurality of perspectives and the richness of the discussion that was to be expected. Political scientists, philosophers, and historians coming from the four corners of the world had the chance to exchange ideas on Intellectual History, Conceptual History, *Begriffsgeschichte* and the various multidisciplinary international research projects that constitute this still relatively small but vibrant field of study.

After a reception organized by the University and a welcoming ceremony, which oscillated between the relatively awkwardness of the protocol and the welcoming smiles of the new colleagues, the workshop kicked off with some introductory theoretical remarks by Jani Marjanen. As an editor of the journal ‘Contributions to the History of Concepts,’ Marjanen was able to bring the heterogeneous group to a similar level with his clear and tongue-in-cheek style that would become the norm for the rest of the sojourn in Helsinki. Martin Burke from the City University of New York, Niklas Olsen from Copenhagen, Margrit Pernau from the Max Planck Institute in Berlin and Jan Iversen from Aarhus University all kept the

perfect balance between a thorough, interesting and thought-provoking stance on theory and a cheerful tone open to criticism and remarks. Whether due to the size of the field or the warmth of its core members, the *Concepta* research group was able to bring each and every graduate student to a new appreciation of the field while cracking a joke here and there along the way. Even the networking after the seminars became an event to look forward to with happy anticipation instead of the usual dread that accompanies the customary and typical self-indulgent *spiel* in international scholarly events.

The first week was full of introductory sessions, which quickly developed into advanced lectures on theory and the deconstruction of some of the master narratives in the field. Even though some of the participants were already familiar with some parts of the topic, the group as a whole was able to evolve in a quasi-simultaneous unison toward profound and surprisingly sophisticated exchanges and debates. Martin Burke gave an overview on the work of Quentin Skinner on *Conceptualism à la Cambridge* and *Genealogy*, Niklas Olsen presented a detailed biography and outline of Koselleck's work, Jan Iversen masterfully connected the history of concepts to discourse analysis and Margrit Pernau meticulously contested main narratives with her stance on translation studies and global history. It is necessary and important to mention how the emphasis was not put on the opposition of the schools from Cambridge and Bielefeld, but on the possibilities offered by both them and many others and the prospects of linking them according to one's research and interest. In that sense, *Concepta* brought the participants to a new place, where the sectarian arguments on whichever school is the most relevant made way for a rich new standpoint on intellectual history. This first week was also the stage for more practical discussions on the future of the field and the possibilities and practicalities for young scholars. All in all, a perfect mixture of theory and practice washed down with evenings in pubs and eating delicious Nordic fare.

If the first part of the workshop surfed on the theoretical approach to conceptual history, the second week confronted the group with clear research projects and case studies. A plurality of young or established scholars took the stage and presented their own ventures in the field, opening the floor for questions and critiques to their own endeavours. The multidisciplinary composition of the guests allowed for everyone to get something out of the series. Nevertheless, the presentations were uneven, as is always the case in such a context. The organizational committee could have favoured a more seminar-based approach during the first week, expanding the theoretical approach at the cost of a myriad of presentations, which, even if they were never boring, hung heavy on a programme already based a bit too much on lectures. Text-based discussions and group work could have benefited the graduate students present in another way, a more participative way.

One of the highlights of the second week was the attention and the light shone on people's papers and projects. Every participant who wanted to do so could circulate a paper beforehand, and the late afternoon of every day was dedicated to an informal session where each and every member of the group was able to ask questions or comment on the aforementioned papers in a friendly and constructive atmosphere. This is where the heterogeneity of the group proved to be a weakness. As in many cases of a multidisciplinary and international workshop, certain papers appeared hermetic to some. However, two if not three professors were assigned to each session in order to secure the possibility to receive enriching feedback. Apart from the usual comments-turned-into-fake-questions and mansplaining that unfortunately seems to be almost inevitable in such a context, every member of the group with the courage to present their project (draft of an article, exposé of a dissertation, etc.) received helpful and encouraging advice. Sadly, these sessions were always relegated to the end of the day and were therefore somewhat ignored by some, or met with a concert of sleepy and weary eyes. A better time-slot for these meetings would have benefited the daring presenters. Furthermore, as the papers were made available only during the first week of a workshop already packed with a long and exhaustive list of readings, many participants focussed on only one or two papers. It would possibly have been more advisable to pass on said papers one or two weeks before the opening of the workshop.

Last but not least, it is necessary to mention the extraordinary organisational skills of both Jani Marjanen and Johan Strang, who not only revealed their brilliance as scholars, but also as coordinators of the event. Accompanying the two weeks, the group was lavishly treated with dinners, picnics, and a historical tour of the city in an overall casual atmosphere favourable to such an intellectual gathering. Moreover, the connection with the Helsinki Summer School meant a possibility to take part in many social activities over the weekend (hiking in a national park, cooking lessons, etc.) and the possibility for organized housing around the city. If the 'summer camp'/'Erasmus youngsters' aspect of such a crowd was not to the taste of everyone, this has nothing to do with the organization, but probably more to do with the age gap between the participants of the usual Summer School and the graduate students of Concepta's workshop. That being said, the annual workshop is in many aspects a 'must' for everyone interested in the possibility to enjoy the last rays of the midnight sun in the northern parts of Europe and a challenging intellectual environment among new colleagues. However, the price of such a summer school makes it an almost exclusive and V.I.P event (around €700 just for the course fees), so it is unfortunate that not all interested parties would have the privilege to debate with Finns.