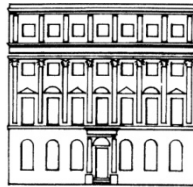


German Historical Institute London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Amar Baadj:

*The Contemporary History of Historiography: International Perspectives on the
Making of Professional History*

Conference Report

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 38, No. 2
(November 2016), pp141-148

The Contemporary History of Historiography: International Perspectives on the Making of Professional History. Conference held at the German Historical Institute London, 16–18 June 2016. Conveners: Lutz Raphael (Trier/London) and Benjamin Zachariah (Trier).

This conference was organized by Lutz Raphael and Benjamin Zachariah from the University of Trier's Department of Modern and Contemporary History. It brought together scholars from across the globe engaged in different sub-fields of historical studies to present and discuss some of the challenges facing the discipline of history and to engage in a critical examination of how contemporary scholars' perspectives are influenced and shaped by various external factors, such as national politics, culture, social class, university politics, publishing practices, the academic job market, and so on. It was a unique opportunity for researchers who would otherwise not normally attend the same conference or panel because of their very different fields of specialization to come together in one place and learn about each other's experiences.

The first paper, 'Coping with the Colonial Past in Historiography and History Teaching', was given by Karel van Nieuwenhuys (Leuven) and Denise Benvolante (Brunswick). This presentation was a comparative study of the portrayal of Congolese history in Belgian and Congolese textbooks from the colonial era to the present. Van Nieuwenhuys began with a discussion of the Belgian sources. In the 1940s and 1950s a triumphalist, totally uncritical depiction of the Belgian colonial enterprise reigned unchallenged. The pre-colonial history of Congo was ignored, King Leopold II was described as a genius and a great man of history, and the Belgian colonial venture was characterized as an act of generosity which brought only positive results for the natives. In the 1960s a more nuanced narrative appeared, and some mention was made of colonial cruelty and exploitation of the Congolese people. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a bifurcation between textbook and academic history. The writing of history textbooks was confined to history teachers who were not aware of the latest developments in their field. Thus while academic historians

The full conference programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

both Belgian and foreign produced important new studies that radically altered the received narrative of Congo's colonial history and exposed the abuses perpetrated by the Belgian government in Africa, this research found little or no echo in Belgian history textbooks of the period. For example, textbooks made no mention of the Belgian government's involvement in the murder of Patrice Lumumba. After 2000 a 'limited rapprochement' between the academic and pedagogical historical communities occurred in Belgium, but there is still much need for improvement and development of the history curriculum as it relates to the colonial period.

Bentrovato talked about Congolese history textbooks. Those of the 1940s and 1950s reflected Belgian colonial propaganda, ignoring Congo's pre-colonial history and glorifying the Belgian conquest and colonization of that land. In the 1960s a native Congolese perspective developed for the first time. Congo's pre-colonial empires were covered along with the abuses and crimes of the colonial system. Resistance to colonialism and the independence struggle became a major theme. In the 1970s and 1980s under the Mobutu regime there was an increased focus on the pre-colonial past as a source of legitimacy. The tribal chief was glorified along with the traditional symbols of Congo's ancient kingdoms. Textbooks written since Mobutu's overthrow have rehabilitated Lumumba as a national hero while describing Mobutu as an agent of neo-colonialism. The revolution launched against the latter by Kabila is seen as a continuation of anti-colonial resistance, this time against the domestic agents of foreign imperialism.

Following this, Berber Bevernage (Ghent) spoke on 'Contemporary Historiography and Theories and Practices of Narrative Reconciliation and Historical Dialogue'. He undertook a critical review of the relation between historiography and truth and reconciliation committees. He noted that professional historians rarely occupy roles of leadership and influence in such committees. Among the motivations for truth and reconciliation projects are belief in the power of confession and forgiveness, a belief in what Bevernage calls the 'just king principle', meaning that if only the holders of power were made aware of a situation they would intervene and bring justice, the belief that understanding the past will prevent it from being repeated, and a belief in the importance of giving voice to opposing narratives in a conflict.

Bevernage pointed out some often overlooked pitfalls of truth and reconciliation committees. He noted that there is a tendency to attribute conflicts solely to opposing narratives and perspectives while ignoring tangible, material causes (for example the economic causes of war, competition for resources, and so on). Sometimes truth itself (finding out what happened in a specific situation) is viewed as secondary to the project of airing opposing narratives. Finally, Bevernage reminded us that not all narratives are equal. Narratives are produced and often one side in a conflict has the resources of a modern state with copious archives while the other side largely lacks this infrastructure.

The keynote address of the conference was a paper delivered by Dominic Sachsenmaier (Göttingen) on 'The Problem of Historiography as a Global Professional Field'. Sachsenmaier observed that though we live in a highly globalized world in which non-Western actors such as China and India play increasingly important roles in the spheres of economy, technology, and politics, the field of historical studies remains extremely Western-centric, reflecting the global power structure of the late nineteenth century more than that of our present time. The most prestigious journals, academic conferences, and history departments are in North America and Western Europe. If we were to apply the techniques of intellectual historians to our field, such as the study of networks and their centres, we would find that the centre of our profession is in the Western nations while the non-Western world remains peripheral. As Sachsenmaier pointed out, the new field of 'global history' reflects this imbalance. For instance, an expert on the history of one of the Western nation-states who knows nothing about non-Western history may become acknowledged as an expert on global history, while it is inconceivable that an Indian or Chinese historian could write a history of historiography that ignores Western works. The result is a great cultural imbalance in the field of historiography which must be taken into account as we attempt to develop our profession further and make it more relevant to the world that we live in.

The second day of the conference began with a paper by Mohamed Jemal Ahmed (Jigjiga) entitled 'Challenges of Teaching National History in Multi-Ethnic Countries: Ethiopia'. Unfortunately, Ahmed was unable to attend the conference in person because of visa problems and his Skype connection failed, so his paper was read aloud by Lutz

Raphael. Ahmed argued that though Ethiopia is a very diverse country in the ethnic, linguistic, and religious sense, this diversity is not reflected in the history curriculum. Through a survey of history students he showed that those from minority communities find the study of Ethiopian history irrelevant and unhelpful because they feel strongly that it is not their history. A common theme is that the history textbooks present a monocultural perspective which depicts Ethiopia as an Orthodox Christian nation that was united and ruled through the centuries by the Solomonic dynasty. Students from minority groups such as the Oromo and Somalis feel that they have been written out of this history. They feel that their history lessons consist of uncritical accounts of the lives of the Ethiopian kings and their wars, with little information about the society and economy. To make matters worse, the historical discipline in general suffers from a lack of prestige and interest in Ethiopia. Where history departments exist (many have closed) they attract only small numbers of students, and often these students have the lowest grades in the faculty. Ahmed made some suggestions as to how this unfortunate situation could be reversed. A revised history curriculum should be created on a national level that will include the histories of formerly marginalized peoples and remove derogatory and divisive statements about particular ethnic groups. He also recommended that Ethiopian history be made a compulsory course for all college and university students.

The next paper, 'The World in a Grain of Sand: Global Histories and their Framing', was presented by Benjamin Zachariah (Trier). In his talk Zachariah asked what global history is, and how we come to terms with it? He noted that global history arose out of the critique of national 'statist' histories and as a response to the post-Cold War trend towards 'globalization' of the world economy. Global history does not always guarantee a non-Eurocentric perspective, which is in any case not *a priori* a bad thing. It should incorporate the *longue durée* vision, if only to disarm some of the legends of authenticity that nation-states habitually use as means of self-legitimation. Zachariah recommended a thematic approach to global history. Courses might be built around the following themes: oceanic histories, empires and imperialism, the history of states and state-building, and travelling ideas and the histories of political movements.

Kavita Philip's contribution was entitled 'Historiographies of the "Anthropocene"'. Her paper was read by Benjamin Zachariah as she

could not attend the conference in person. In her paper, Philip described the contrast between environmental activism in the first and third worlds. She noted that the American climate change documentary *Disruption* was a disappointment to Indian audiences because for them it reflected middle-class, Western preoccupations that had little relevance for their particular circumstances. She also criticized the concept of Enlightenment humanism. In her view it 'risks erasing decades of academic work done on the different and violent ways in which caste, gender, race, class, and region effect environmental changes on different groups'. She said that science must be understood in its historical and social context. It must be recognized that climate change affects different social classes and countries in different ways.

Then Andreas Eckert (Berlin) presented a paper on 'Africa in/and Global History'. He gave an overview of the development of the field of African history since the middle of the twentieth century and its relation to global history. He noted that African historical studies blossomed in the 1960s amid great enthusiasm in the immediate post-colonial era. Governments and society supported and accorded prestige to history since it was seen as part of the nation-building project. Indigenous African history departments and journals flourished and academic congresses were held in Africa. Pre-colonial history and resistance became major themes of research while colonial history was seen as outmoded. There was also great enthusiasm for learning local languages and for the study of oral history.

In the 1970s African historical studies in Africa itself suffered a loss of prestige and underwent a retraction which has unfortunately continued to the present. Journals and history departments have closed, there is a lack of hard cash to purchase foreign books and periodicals and to fund travel abroad. Eckert also mentioned the 'NGOization' of African academia. Disciplines that are seen as helpful to gaining employment in NGOs such as development studies are favoured over traditional disciplines such as history. Contemporary African historians are interested in local history because it does not require expensive research abroad and it is seen as something that is useful in the context of current politics, or to provide 'local expertise' for foreign companies and NGOs. Global history is often viewed with suspicion, particularly because Africa often features in such histories only in the context of the slave trade.

The last presentation on Friday, entitled 'China, Cultural China, or the Sinophone World: Who Gets to Write Chinese History', was by Charlotte Kroll (Heidelberg). In her presentation Kroll looked at the various meanings of China in contemporary discourse and how this has impacted the field of Chinese historiography. To some, 'contemporary Chinese historiography' refers to the practice of academics in the educational institutions of the People's Republic of China. Others have a broader definition. Tu Weiming talked about a 'Cultural China'. This embraces mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, the Chinese diaspora abroad, and even the international community of individuals who have worked or studied in China, and who try to understand Chinese culture and interpret it for their respective linguistic communities. What unites all of these groups is shared culture.

An alternative model is the concept of a 'Sinophone World', a term coined by the Australian Sinologist Geremie Barmé. Barmé's Sinophone World is as broad as Tu Weiming's Cultural China; the difference, however, lies in the uniting factor, which is not culture, but a shared language. It is a global, transnational linguistic space similar to the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. Barmé believes that the act of critically engaging with Chinese culture and language makes one a part of the Sinophone world. Thus we can conclude that the definition of the 'Chinese World' is still a subject of debate and personal interpretation as is, by extension, our notion of the Chinese historiographical community.

The third day of the conference began with Johannes Zechner's (Berlin) presentation 'Nations Behind Glass: Negotiating Identities at the History Museum'. In it, Zechner compared German and American museums of national history. The National Museum of American History in Washington DC was established in the 1960s with the goal of showing the USA as a society driven by progress and democracy. Arrangement of exhibits is topical with sections about the American presidency, invention in America, America at war, and daily life. The history of non-white groups was largely sidelined until 1976. Museums for Native American and African American history are located near the National History Museum.

The German Historical Museum was founded in West Germany in 1987. After unification it took over the collection of the East German Museum for German History. The German Historical Museum's per-

manent exhibition covers 2,000 years of German history in chronological order. It is particularly strong in political and military affairs artefacts. It also has a strong focus on labour history, which reflects the heritage of East Germany. Germany is treated mainly as a white Christian nation, and there is little inclusion of recent migrant communities. According to Zechner both the US and German museums are political endeavours as much as, or even more than, scholarly institutions. Both were founded in times of national uncertainty with the goal of consolidating and reinforcing a certain vision of the national identity.

The last paper of the conference, 'History Museums, Memory, Traumas in the last Twenty Years?', was given by Ilaria Porciani (Bologna). She looked at the relatively recent global trend of museums created around the themes of victims and traumatic heritages. She asked how these museums deal with trauma, whether they 'freeze' it, and what role their objects play in this process of freezing the trauma, how they bring people together over traumatic experiences, and what effect the memory of this trauma has on the next generation. She noted various cases. For example the Australian Museum presents the Aboriginal genocide as a trauma for both sides. In Eastern European museums communism has been represented as a trauma that came from outside Eastern Europe, ignoring the fact that Eastern Europeans were a part of the communist history of their nations. She also explored the possibility of keeping the site of trauma exactly as it is to freeze the moment in time. A good example of this is the site of Oradour sur Glane in France, which has been left in its destroyed state.

Finally she discussed museums of forced migration such as the museum of the Pied Noir migrants in Marseille and, in particular, the museum of the Italian forced migration from Istria. This museum chronicles the suffering of the ethnic Italians who were forcibly expelled from Istria after the end of the Second World War. Porciani notes that such museums by their nature only consider the events under question from a national perspective. The Istrian museum does not seek to understand the Italian forced migrant experience within the larger context of the Second World War and the Italian government's role in the Balkans during this period.

At the end of the conference Lutz Raphael noted that despite the great diversity of the conference participants in terms of their aca-

CONFERENCE REPORTS

demographic backgrounds, fields of study, and methodologies, they were all able to reach a common ground through recognition of major, problematic issues that face the professional discipline of history today in different parts of the globe. He said that a better awareness of the state of our field had been achieved. The discussions were very lively throughout the entire conference and much exchange of ideas occurred. The participants agreed that the conference was a great success and look forward to future work on the themes and problems that were discussed.

AMAR BAADJ (Trier)