

[Global Histories]

A student journal

Review: International Students of History Association Annual Conference – Maribor, April 2018

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.205>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2018), pp. 199–202

ISSN: 2366-780X

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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.

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Annual Conference of the International Students of History Association (ISHA) Maribor, April 2018

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This year’s Annual Conference of ISHA, the International Students of History Association, on “Modernization of History” was a special one, as it was jointly organized by two sections across the border from each other. The conference was held in Maribor, Slovenia, but major contributions were made by the ISHA section of Graz, Austria and their respective universities. This April we gathered to join the debate on “Digital Humanities,” a broadly defined field, which encompasses both object and method of historical research, to discuss emerging ways of research and presenting historical material. The conference was a representation of the blurring field of Digital Humanities, as it covered a wide range of approaches and topics. This reached from discussing ‘new’ media, such as YouTube, to interdisciplinary research methods, such as combining geographical data and historical research in a new form.

Apart from the opening keynote lecture, and the final discussion, the participants mostly exchanged their ideas in smaller groups. The keynote lecture opened the seminar with a presentation on historical films and their conveyance of history which led to debate on movies as an educational tool and source for historical research. We mainly debated upon which methodology films can be evaluated and, to be frank, if historical exactitude is the most pressing concern and goal of historical film making. The debate on entertainment media providing a matching or competing depiction of history continued in smaller groups. Participants discussed the role of YouTube, Internet blogs, and computer games in altering the views of the past. Other workshops took a different approach on “Digital Humanities” by looking at their integration in traditional places of historical representation and asked questions on how new technologies can be applied in, for example, museums or in schools. A very different discussion opened the effects of digita-

lization on enhancing interdisciplinary cooperation in a workshop on “Maps” as sources. This workshop was a result of cooperation with EGEA, the European Geography Association, and two Geography students provided input and moderated the discussions on ways and biases of projecting geo-information on a flat surface of a paper. Similarly, another workshop discussed the role of informatics and computing in evaluating historical sources.

These very different issues were channeled together in a final discussion, where all workshops presented their ideas so that we could create a general picture of the “Digital Humanities,” which remains a vague buzz-word. Instead of going into a broader discussion on the definition of the term, we tried to tackle the field by reflecting on the debates other scholars opened before us. This was probably not the best approach possible, as these discussions are often hampered by mainly going back into debates on definitions, such as what ‘digital’ even means and what tools and methods it contains. We have seen that computing technologies can successfully be integrated into concepts of museums or teaching in schools, but argued, whether new methodologies can lead to entirely new research questions or ‘only’ offer some new ways of answering them.

Unfortunately, the concept of the conference did not allow much space for plenary discussions. Most debates stayed among the small groups, which meant that we could not reflect much on general outcomes. This is arguably a structural weakness of ISHA conferences. The conferences offer mostly a place for small group work and a lively debate on a small scale, but often fall short on synthesizing the individual workshops into a larger whole. Another issue was that apart from the workshops the academic program of the conference was rather slim, ISHA conferences usually accompany workshops with other formats, such as roundtable discussions and more lectures and plenary debates, but this year’s annual conference came short on these. It should also be remarked, that the annual conference is a place for ISHA to debate its internal affairs and elect its new officials for the coming term. The general assembly is always the place to continue the ongoing discussion in ISHA about how to raise the academic standards of its events making the organization (the largest of its kind in Europe) still accessible for students of all countries and academic levels. Here we debated the role of ISHA as a representative body for students of history in Europe and how we could make the organization and its work more visible.

In summary, the 2018 Annual Conference of ISHA proved to be an event of fruitful discussions. We explored possibilities and directions of the emerging field “Digital Humanities,” but only reached a conclusion about its nature as a supportive matter for historical research and also leading to new research questions. The conference itself was a the first of its kind as it was co-hosted by two ISHA sections and proved a high level of international cooperation from the students of ISHA. Still, there was room for more discussion, especially on the larger scale,

and the variety of events was not as strong as other seminars and conferences of the organization.