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Global History Student Conference

Freie Universität Berlin, May 2018

REVIEWED BY REETI BASU

This was the fourth occasion that students from the Freie Universität's Global History Department have organised an international conference, bringing together aspiring historians from across the world. The conference in Berlin was hosted by the student body of the Global History Master's program. The participants of the conference were mainly young research scholars coming from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. The panels of the conference covered different topics and issues of interest for global historians and were also chaired by the students of the department. Before the final presentation at the conference, papers were already circulated among the panellists and comments were given by the chairs. These constructive discussions in advance created scope for dialogue amongst the panellists—something which is of utmost importance for any academic conference. Post-presentation discussions with the audience on the overarching themes of the panels or on individual papers were fruitful as well.

This conference has provided a platform for young scholars to discuss their papers in front of an international audience. This has been a valuable practice for aspiring historians on how to present the arguments of their research papers to a critically engaged audience. For future conferences, it will now be easier to know for the panellists, including myself, what to keep in mind while presenting research. This conference has certainly provided good experience for us future global historians. The international nature of the conference, as well as the wide variety of topics, put an emphasis upon how important it was for students to make their research understandable for the listener who is not an expert in the field. In this regard, most of the panellists were quite efficient in making their presentation comprehensive to the audience.

The conference began with a keynote speech on the topic of 'what is global history,' delivered by one of the senior professor of the department, Sebastian Conrad. Professor Conrad quite specifically defined the 'global' in global history. For the purposes of academic clarity, it is important to understand phenomena of 'globalisation' as well as the distinctive approaches of 'global history' and 'world history' and in what ways they differ. This conference tried to draw these distinctions and answer the ensuing questions as well as it could. People from different regions were able to contextualise their research within the global context. The themes of the panels ranged from ancient history to the contemporary world, showing that global history itself is not a constrained to the study of 'modern' phenomena. Scholars presented papers on the most different aspects of history, for example: art, literature and intellectual history to name but a few. Different

approaches of historical methodology were utilised by panellists to explore the varying nuances of global history.¹

I presented in a panel addressing topics of the history of sexuality and labour relations in an imperial context. My co-panellists presented papers on the legality of the so-called ‘white slave trade’ in turn-of-the-century Europe; marriages between displaced women and prisoners of war in the post Second World War Soviet Union; and lastly on sexual repression in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in British schools. My own paper dealt with the relations between the perception of women’s bodies and foreign soldiers in Bengal after the Second World War. While we presented papers on histories of differing contexts in different countries, we simultaneously were able to address the commonality between the issues, while not brushing over specificities.

The conference has rightly pointed out that human history is a shared subject and that the exploration of this interconnectivity is where the importance of global history lies. No country or nation state cannot extricate itself from global history. For instance, when one discusses ancient India’s silk routes of long-distance trade, it is necessary to address the geopolitical background of these routes which connected not only people of various Asian countries, but other foreign countries as well. However, though we can apply this global focus to many cases, it is important to recognise that not every history can be global. Although the panels had been organised in a particular way to address the specificities of global history, some of the papers still struggled to produce ‘global’ elements in their argument. Only talking about the existence of global exchanges cannot be understood as global history, one needs to explore the contexts structuring these exchanges.

Although scholars from all backgrounds were invited, representatives from third world countries were a minority. However, as this conference provided travel funding for all its panellists from outside Berlin, it at least created an accessible platform for young scholars of many different backgrounds. The last session of the conference rightly pointed out how the question of the language of study has always been a barrier in global history. The irony is that, although we are talking about creating a space for global interaction, we could not free ourselves from English as the only medium of common communication in an international space. The dominance of English, that can be seen as the aftermath of colonialism, seems unavoidable in the present context. Yet, this fact poses the question as to whether it is possible to use any other language in such an event dedicated to studying global history? Ultimately, practicality must win out: The relevance of a common language is felt in a global platform like this conference, where the shared language allows for collective communication within such a diverse group.

¹ For a full list of the panels at this year’s conference, please refer to the program: The Fourth International Berlin Global History Student Conference, “Conference Program,” accessed October 12, 2018, <https://globalhistorystudentconference.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/final-conference-program.pdf>.

Several participating scholars raised the question of how difficult it is to access primary sources of foreign countries. Notably, they expressed how it is oftentimes financially infeasible to travel to a foreign country to collect sources. Even if one is able to access the source material, language again may pose a problem. Discussions on the future of global history at the conference therefore suggested the need to create an easily accessible platform for sources of global history. One valid suggestion may entail the creation of a digital archive.

Post-conference chats continued these productive and provocative conversations on the present condition of global historical research, as well as its future. This kind of informal interaction gave insights into each other's research and methodological approaches as well.

The only real problem of the conference was that of time constraints, merely having two days for the conference one always had to choose between two simultaneous panels. That said, it would not have otherwise been possible to accommodate forty papers in ten panels. Of course, one must keep in mind the financial and organizational constraints of holding an international conference. However, it would have been preferable if the conference could have gone on for an additional day.

I would like to end my review by saying that this conference was truly 'global' in nature. One of the most enduring parts of the conference was the post-conference city walk we took in Berlin that explored the city's colonial history. Aside from the academic discussion, it was a pleasure to interact with these international scholars and enjoy such an interesting historical city. From both an academic as well as social perspective, the conference was quite meticulously organised and thoroughly enjoyable.