

# [Global Histories]

## A student journal

**Review: World History Student Conference, King's College London, May 2018**

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## World History Student Conference

### King's College London, May 2018

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#### REVIEWED BY SANDRA ALSÉN AND CHARLOTTE SOPHIE KOHRS

The World History Student Conference, held on May 5th, 2018, was the third conference of its kind, organized by students from the World History and Cultures M.A. program at King's College in London. This year they had invited sixteen panelists to their central London Strand campus to discuss various aspects of *Activism, Identity and Conflict*, the theme of this year's conference. The day-long program included six panels in three sessions, with two panels running parallel to each other during each session. The panels covered a wide range of topics from *Memorialising the Past*, and *Commodities*, to the history of *Transnational Movements*.

The day began with a focus on one of the overarching themes of the conference, *Activism*, as Dr. Sarah Irving described how participating in political protests and social movements had sparked her interest in the study of activism from a historical perspective. Dr. Irving's keynote drew on her dual experiences as an activist and historian, and highlighted some of the challenges facing historians of activism and social movements. For example, she pointed out some discrepancies between her own recollections of political protests and narrations of the same events in the newspapers and other media that are often used as sources by historians.

Most interestingly, Dr. Irving's keynote emphasized the far-reaching implications—both positive and negative—that academic research and writing can have for activists and social movements. Academic interest in a specific movement can alter public perceptions of the political causes it champions and the writings of historians are often understood as having implications for current-day political debates and conflicts. Histories of activism call into question the image of historical research as far removed from contemporary politics. Dr. Irving therefore urged conference participants to consider the social and political implications of their research and the potential for historians to also become activists.

This discussion continued during the panel on *Transnational Movements*, during which the panelists presented examples of activism from many corners of the world and the paper titled *International Labour History of Disabled Workers: The Case of the International Labour Organisation* provided an interesting parallel to Dr. Irving's reflections on her dual roles of both researching and participating in activism. The author of the paper had conducted her research as part of an ongoing project initiated by the International Labour Organisation and spoke to the challenges and possibilities presented to her as a historian employed by the organization that she was researching.

But while almost all papers presented in the various panels offered considerable food for thought, many participants—panelists included—were disappointed by the lack of engagement with the individual topics and panelists during the panel sessions. Due to the time restraints of a one-day conference, after the ten minutes allotted to each paper presentation, there was often only enough time remaining to ask one question of each panelist. As a consequence, there was no way to spark a discussion that might have put the papers presented in better context with each other or the conference as a whole. And even though all participants had the opportunity to mingle during the wine reception in the afternoon, a bit more time devoted to reflection on the links between the presented topics would have been much appreciated.

To balance this lack of discussion time during the panel sessions, the program had included a 40 minute Roundtable Discussion. Yet, during the Round Table the focus lay much more (and possibly rightfully, so) on the discussion of another theme of the conference: *Conflict*. While conflicts and war often play important roles in traditional diplomatic and international history, it was argued, world history and global history have a tendency to prioritize cooperation and connections over disintegration and conflict. Perhaps historians hoping to move away from the nation-state as the standard unit of analysis risk losing sight of state-driven conflict and historical actors whose lives did not involve transnational entanglements.

Dr. Christine Mathias followed up on this thought in her closing remarks, wherein she argued that future historians will need to use a world history sensibility to write also about disintegration, immobility, and the people and ideas that remained in one place. A paper from another panel, *Black New York: Narratives in the Urban Landscape*, exemplifies how to integrate world history into the local—in this case urban history. This paper described how, in the urban landscape of New York, workers, passers-by; and tourists continuously come into contact with the public American memory of slavery. The paper evaluated the effectiveness of places of memory and memorials in educating the people who came into contact with them. The papers from this panel all dealt with the localized manifestation of global events and public history, and therefore might be a good intermediary on this issue.

As the course leader of a study program in World History, Dr. Mathias also reflected on the role world history could play in today's political climate. Without going so far as to encourage historian activism, she suggested that global perspectives on history could provide interesting counterpoints in a time of resurgent nationalism and critiques of globalization. An important task for historians going forward, she argued, was to diversify the voices contributing to historical research. The conference itself reflected this need for further diversification within the discipline as a significant number of the panelists came from the same institutions or similar academic traditions. Enriching historical research with more and

new perspectives should therefore be a priority going forward and the organization of international student conferences where diverse voices are engaged in conversation seems to us an excellent start. Perhaps political protests and social movements are not the only avenue open to historians wanting to effect change. By successfully hosting an international conference and many interesting conversations, the team behind this year's conference may well have engaged in their own version of historian activism.