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**Conference Review: Fifth Global Histories Student Conference Freie Universität Berlin –
Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, May 31st-June 2nd, 2019**

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*Fifth Global Histories
Student Conference*
Freie Universität Berlin –
Humboldt Universität zu Berlin,
Berlin, May 31st-June 2nd 2019

reviewed by

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The “Global Histories Student Conference” is in itself a masterclass of global history-making. In its fifth version, the student organising team from the M.A. Global History from the Freie Universität and Humboldt-University zu Berlin has again handpicked interesting presentations. The panels followed a dynamic programme, where participants of different origins could exchange their efforts in contributing to this innovative historical approach.

As there now seems to be a worldwide consensus on the establishment of Global History as a historical perspective, this was a proper moment for converging methodological self-analysis with the participants’ aims for self-enrichment. Being amongst students allowed sincere commentaries; everyone seemed interested in hearing the feedback. Questions raised on-site supplemented the points of discussion that the organising team suggested to panellists in advance. Most students shared their interests and accommodated the different views well. Beyond our differences, it was a place for spotting our common achievements and concerns about the use of a global perspective.

Although one could have expected to see more professors circulating around the conference, the opening keynote by Lisa Hellman was enough to inspire the next days to come. In her presentation, Hellman painted a universe of possibilities enabled through the perspective of global history. It was impressive to see how a well-thought

combination of transnational sources, interpreted from creative analytical paths, could generate the study of local and intercultural circulations of knowledge and communication, as she does in her current investigations. Hellman demonstrated diverse strategies for global historians to pursue, remarkably observing the use of micro-histories to expound macro contexts which permits tackling multiple motivations. As Hellman noted, now that global history has achieved more visibility, there is more of it to contest.

This field addresses well what Reinhart Koselleck deems a “history in the plural”. That is, it is not about establishing one analytical model, but rather developing a plurality of theories and methods with which historians can illuminate specific themes and problems.¹ The conference’s arrangement of panels included multiple themes to be explored. On presentation days, simultaneous panels left attendees with hard decisions to make on which to join. Yet, any choices made would have led to creative ways to look at problems. The panels also incorporated different historical periods to debate.

Panel four, “Markets and Ownerships,” illustrates this encompassing rich mix. For example, exploring the British East India

1 See: Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crises: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, (Cambridge, Mass.:MIT Press, 1998). Also, Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).

Company's possession and trading of native slaves in Southwest India, Vinil Paul revealed a history of that particular period of British imperial activity which, from a broadened perspective, differed from the slave trade in West and East Africa by other empires that expanded South Atlantic routes in the same period. Then, Daniel Villamarin presented a very contemporary analysis of the transnational regulation of shipping containers through contracts and global trade standards. Notably, the points of conversion between those papers were their global focus on the circulation of goods. Although Paul analysed a problem dated two centuries earlier, both illustrated the forces at work of regulation rules following similar logistics of time-efficiency and a production-oriented mindset.

Other papers in same panel likewise focused on circulations, but based on capital. Diana Gluck demonstrated the role of investments to contemporary war logistics in Yemen. And Jiajia Liu revealed ancient role models for the Shanghai Stock Exchange, a Chinese financial institution which is considered among the most innovative. Ultimately, the panel generated interesting debates on global interactions, leaning mostly towards the economic, but also including cultural interactions as well as considerations of geography. Importantly, the panellists shed light on interactions happening independently from the European centre.

Studies centred on intensifying global interactions seem to be the road most travelled by global historians. It is well known that this methodology envisages overcoming national boundaries, narrow views and binary standpoints. Still, much is to be done in order to “change the terrain on which historians think,” as proposed by Sebastian Conrad in his book *What is Global History?* As Conrad noted, histories of global interactions are key. Interactions have some regular and sustained patterns of exchange at their core, and are thus able to shape societies in profound ways. “There have always been cross-border exchanges, their operation and impact depended on the degree of systemic integration on a global scale.”² During the conference, a preponderance of interaction-based studies was an observable trend.

Looking at intensified circulations in modern transoceanic history, panel six, “Ports and Oceans in Global Perspectives” approached maritime entanglements. Here, the panellists discussed the role of the Jolly Roger Jacobites in instilling piracy activities in the early eighteenth century and investigated the global competition for the South Atlantic amid the Revolutionary Wars of 1792-1802. They attempted to rethink Guam as an archipelagic constellation, and presented an environmental history of Greenpeace's shift into global action against predator whaling in the 1960s.

² Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2016), 10-11.

Most presentations in the Berlin Student Conference recognised the contribution of post-colonial theory in elaborating broadened historical narratives. This was particularly debated in the third panel, “Transnational Activisms,” which encompassed the study of interactions and networks functioning outside of mainstream centres. Also, historians coming from underrepresented locations demonstrated awareness to the “methodological Eurocentrism” so criticised by global historians. Within this analytical framework, the ten panels revealed an interdisciplinary epistemology in assembling vital themes, such as migrations, property, othering, imagination, visual construction, and agency, and also entwining fields such as environmental history and encouraging unusual sources to their work.

Very interesting experiments could be seen in panels related to colonial themes. For example, the first panel, entitled “Colonialism and Anticolonialism: Practices and Identities,” contemplated the spaces “in-between.” In another panel, “The Visual as Document,” it was stimulating to see psychogeography—a “vintage” concept carved by Guy Debord in 1955— combined with a global historical perspective to drive an esthetical reading of Poznan’s cultural context. Also interesting was the use of postcards as a focal source of post-colonial analyses of narrative and image construction

in colonial Germany, and the use of photography as a common medium for interrelating the Crimean and American Civil wars. Lastly, the paper, “The Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Discipline in the Early Twentieth Century,” displayed a negotiated identity that broadened the sense of cultural belonging.

The format of the conference allowed discussions on various historical periods in the same panel. While all periods (except for medieval) were accommodated, most papers focused on the 19th and 20th centuries. Perhaps this reflects how global interactions were intensified in the transition to the 19th century and the de-colonial processes of the 20th century. Imperial-based themes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could, however, possibly resist being overcome by the national biases of history-making as this construct had, in these periods, not yet been established. Even if earlier sources might seem at first glance as antithetical to “global” structures, it is possible to frame them within the power relations involved in global interactions different to those of the late modern or contemporary periods.

Overall, during the conference, discovering what we have in common was challenging, even when there was a vaguely similar approach, a consistent tool used in all papers. Yet, the real gain of diversity was to have an exchange on the practical challenges of the field. As such, linguistic barriers appeared to be a common concern,

requiring multiple knowledges for reading our sources. That, in turn, brings translation to the centre of attention. Language matters so widely that the “global turn” and “linguistic turn” go along together well, shedding light to plural narratives. Acknowledging how plurality and language matters leads to the critical use of primary sources. In our tasks of providing complexity to mainstream narratives, a transnational selection of archival resources becomes crucial. The global requires numerous, geographically-spread sources. A methodology that enables broadening boundaries ends up broadening our fieldwork. Still, global thinking is rewarding since it allows us to consider plural conclusions.

To conclude, I make a final remark on Berlin as an object of study itself. A walking day around the city remains as my final picture of the conference. It was a fieldwork exercise on widening the academic environment. First, in a more “traditional” historical tour around the Mitte district, and second, a guided tour around the neighbourhood of Wedding, led by the *Berlin Postkolonial* activist group, who explained the grassroots reasons for the movement’s aims of reviewing local street names to respect the hardships of the colonial past in Africa. Those entanglements become clear in this city which stands as a centre of global circulations, connections and interactions, manifested in the most extreme ends. The Student Conference makes

Berlin one of the most encouraging places to think and rethink eurocentrism, providing perspectives and tools to reach beyond it. In its fifth edition, the Global Histories Conference reassured its pioneering skill in rethinking “methodological eurocentrism” while promoting state-of-the-art debates and addressing theory in practice.