

Workshop “European Perspectives on American History”

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Do European historians of the United States bring a particular perspective to their scholarship? Does our position as outsiders to American academia and culture give us a different, unique take on U.S. history? Most of us have been confronted by this oft-asked question. We propose to engage in a collective reflection—at a European level—on the particular position (in a sociological sense) of European historians of the United States in our academic field. Our goal is to assess the current situation in historical perspective, and to inquire if there is a distinctive perspective European scholars bring to American history due to our institutional and intellectual position. This in turn will allow reflection on well-publicized recent attempts to internationalize the writing of US history.

First, we need to question our national or continental assumptions. What does it mean to be a “European” or an “American” historian nowadays? Does the location from which an historian writes matter? To what extent do national culture, training, residence, and career affect the kind of history we produce and write? Are early twenty-first-century European scholars of U.S. history outsiders to American academia and culture in the same way as previous generations? There have been many changes in the past decade on how we work. One of the most obvious is the use of the internet, so ubiquitous from finding archives to communicating with colleagues across the globe. Some evolutions seem to indicate that non-US based scholars of American history might be less marginal in our field today: the academic world is fast internationalizing, exchanging professors and students alike at unprecedented rates, throughout Europe as well as with the United States. There is also a growing awareness, within the field of American history, that a purely national approach is no longer sustainable: does the promotion of transnational history bring European contributions center-stage? However, we must acknowledge that the academic world is not perfectly fluid. Institutions matter, and the various national systems constrain what we can, and are expected to, do. Historiographical cultures also vary: as we engage with the majority of our colleagues, we have to conform to the standards of our discipline at home.

Another line of inquiry relates to the specificity of a European perspective on American history. There are four aspects we would like to explore. This first one is comparative: are our position and perspective as European historians of the United States different from those of our Latin American, Australasian or Asian colleagues? Conversely, are American historians of European history in a similar position as ours? The second aspect relates to the effects the recent political and academic evolutions of the U.S. have on our position within European academia. Why choose U.S. history? Does it make a difference to work on the U.S. rather than any other foreign country? Does being a US historian make a European scholar a ‘double outsider’ – both to the US and the home academy? Does the social and political demand for expertise on the U.S. affect our work? And more internally, does the growing weight of the American academic world

in all non-Americanist fields—its size, organization, finances, and role as leader in providing new paradigms—change our position and our missions within our respective universities? The third aspect deals with the institutional arrangements those evolutions bring. Two things come to mind and need to be explored: the role of American scholars and institutions in developing our field in Europe—e.g. the Salzburg Seminar; the distinction and balance between American history and American studies and the institutional constraints they shape. Finally—and conversely—in what does a study of European “outsiders” lead to a reflection on how “insiders” (American scholars) write their own history—both in terms of purpose and style?

Furthermore, it might be difficult, indeed impossible, to find a common European perspective: traditions are fragmented nationally, and many of us deal more frequently with our American than our European colleagues. Yet, can we make sense of the diversity? Is there a distinction between the British and Irish Anglophone academia and Continental Europe? Between Eastern and Western Europe? Or Northern and Southern Europe? Can we find other factors of differentiation, such as generations or specialty? How is it different to enter the field of U.S. history in Europe nowadays from twenty or thirty years ago? Do the specialists of pre-national, that is colonial, America, for instance, have a different position than their colleagues actually working on the “United States”?

With this preliminary set of questions, we aim at characterizing and mapping our field of research, as European historians of the United States, and make explicit our own position within it. We propose to do it in 9 sessions, organized along two perspectives: one focusing on the structures of our field, and the other on our scholarly practices (see program below for details).