

Volker Berghahn's answers to Giovanni Bernardini's questions for *Ricerche di Storia Politica*

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1. Basing on your peculiar "Transatlantic" experience – both in terms of your academic biography and of your research interests – what is the present state of the participation of historians in the civil, social and political debates in the United States and in Germany (or Europe, if you prefer)? Which are the difference between the two shores of the Atlantic, and in comparison with the past?

I would like to answer this question first with respect to the United States. While historians are actively involved in socio-economic and political debates across the Atlantic, it is important to emphasize that this is a large continent with hundreds of History departments. Some historians will therefore participate in debates on regional issues relating to such problems as abortion, gun control, the death penalty, or funding of schools and universities. Those contributing to national issues will be most concerned with problems of the (mal)functioning of the American political system, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the deterioration of the national infrastructure, be it in mass transportation, education, or environmental degradation. The latter issue is of course closely linked to problems of climate change and global warming. While a third group will also focus on these questions, their main concern is with American foreign policy, its strategies and its enormous costs that also deflect resources that are sorely needed for domestic programs. Given the size of the educational system, many activist historians will join the new digital networks either by having their own blogs or by responding to articles that appear electronically or in print. In this sense, it may be said that American historians participate in the communications revolution that we are still in the midst of and that enables specialists in the history and politics of foreign societies to bring their expertise instantaneously into the public domain. Accordingly, historians have also contributed to the debate on Open Access and online teaching as a global tool of the future. Consequently, there is also an interest in "globalization", even if – at least until recently – this seems to have been more of a smokescreen behind which the "Americanization" of the world has continued both in technological and cultural terms. The question is whether this phase is now coming to an end after the political and military unilateralism that the United States adopted after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc is now being replaced by an international system that is more multi-polar both in terms of the world economy and world politics.

In Germany with its much smaller historical establishment, discussions of public issues are inevitably more confined but may also be divided into regional, national and transnational concerns. Overall the most striking development seems to me to be the growing trend to break out of the national-historical frame. Quite a number of historians now advocate the need to Europeanize the histories of the EU member states and some also take the leap straight into the globalization debate. Traditionally, German historians have not been active as consultants to the regional, national or European governments where social scientists have dominated just as in the

United States. Still, there have been interventions in major topics of the day, such as the book by Hans-Ulrich Wehler on the growing problem of social inequalities that was designed to influence the political debate in the run-up of the 2013 federal elections. At the same time the interest in History continues to be strong among educated people. Daily newspapers and not just academic journals regularly review important historical studies. History books are also being purchased in the dozens of bookshops in towns and cities that continue to attract customers and not only to browse. With Germany being one of the country that has wrestled most persistently and earnestly with its Nazi past, this subject has also remained a major field for historians to write about and to discuss in public.

2. Why do you think in the US political debate there is often a need to “invoke” history in order to legitimize and strengthen a given political position (as in the recent case of the Tea Party)? In this “public use of history” do you see proof of a vitality of history or not? Do you think such propensity to invoke/use history to be a distinctive character of the US public and political debate, or do you find any similarities with Europe?

This seems to contrast with American society where historians do challenge received views of the American past quite regularly, but where the power of tradition and the persistence of myths goes deeper, be it about America’s foreign wars or its internal history, for example with respect to slavery or the treatment of native Americans. The power of very crude interpretations of American history is even more marked with respect to such movements as the Tea Party that sees itself as the direct heir of the Boston revolutionaries of the 18th century.

But what seems to be underlying it are deep anxieties and fears about the future position of the United States in the world and the growing ethnic and socio-economic imbalances at home. Hence the opposition to immigration and the quest to reverse it; hence also the invoking of the traditional American resistance to an expansion of the welfare state. Washington in this view is deemed too powerful; the country is said to be dominated by faceless bureaucrats at the center who devise ever new ways of raising the taxes on the so-called “middle class”. Similar arguments, it is true, can also be heard all over Europe, but they appear to be more marginalized partly because the electoral system of proportional representation dissipate the power of radical parties and movements, partly because the elected representatives in Germany and Europe are better informed about the complexities of modern urban and industrial societies and do not spout such amazingly simplistic slogans as can be heard in the House of Representatives in Washington or in the state assemblies, often proliferated through the private mass media that have their own *terrible simplificateurs*.

3. What changes - if any - are occurring in teaching (method, tools, subjects) and in the popularization of history in the American universities?

This is a widely discussed and difficult subject because all of us are in the middle of a communications revolution. Some believe that the internet has virtually limitless possibilities of proliferating information and knowledge around the globe. There are some historians who, like colleagues in other disciplines, have been offering courses online that are reaching tens of thousands of students. These courses are fascinating to watch, partly because of the charismatic

style of the presenter and partly because of the visual materials that tend to illustrate and complement the spoken word. Two problems have immediately arisen, though, namely:

a. While these courses were originally offered for free, the temptation of charging for them quickly emerged. Commercial companies were founded that promised to market the courses and to generate income not only for their own investors but also for the scholars who provided the content. The results so far have not been encouraging. To begin with, the drop-out rate has been extremely high, and it has also been difficult to test and give credit to those students who finished their courses.

b. There is the lack of personal contact in long-distance learning. In the 1960s, the Open University in Britain attracted many students who signed up for its televised courses. The History program led by Arthur Marwick was particularly successful. But soon the desire and demand arose among the viewers to discuss the problems raised in person with the lecturer and among the participants themselves. The solution that was found was to bring students together for two weeks on various university campuses to hold seminars. This was possible within relatively small country like the United Kingdom. Whether students taking part in mass courses taught online can be brought together in this fashion would obviously require a huge organizational effort and a permanent infrastructure. Even assuming that History would be taught in this way across the United States or other continents in the future, the advantages of study at a particular college or university in direct daily contact with teachers and other students is likely to be personally more rewarding and effective. The result will be a two-class system and a division between those who take online courses for free or minimum tuition and those who can afford to pay the much higher costs of living and studying in a college or university with their group-teaching methods, their social life, extracurricular offerings and opportunities to network and forge lasting friendships. The American university system is thus confronted with enormous challenges of a further expansion of democratized education with its promises and dangerous pitfalls, and so will be the institutions of higher education in Europe and other regions, if they are not facing them already.

4. As an innovator of economic history, you have been promoting cross-boundary research among the branches of historiography, and multidisciplinary, as methods of work (such as with the research tracks of “economic culture”, or “Transatlantic networks”). What is your opinion on the state of exchanges and cooperation between history and the social sciences? Through which research paths do you consider possible to make the dialogue between these disciplines ever more effective? How could academic institutions – both in the US and in Europe – support this challenge?

I have indeed published on economic and business history not only because I see them as important sub-fields that provide major insights into how societies evolved and “tick”, but also because I have always regretted the compartmentalization of the historical discipline. Historically speaking, the fault lies with the political and intellectual historians of the nineteenth century who were not prepared to take the newly emerging genres of economic and social history into the fold. Consequently, the practitioners of these latter genres wandered off to economics departments or established separate business schools where many of them work to this day. The drawback of this separation was not only that a dialogue became more difficult institutionally. It was also that, with economics moving into a quantitative direction, economic historians were

under pressure to follow suit. Meanwhile, historians had added to the traditional canons of political, diplomatic and military history the new sub-fields of social, cultural, gender history. Research into minorities, memory, and emotions also began to sweep the board. It is not difficult to see that these fields were not interested in statistics and mathematical modeling.

I have tried to bridge these gaps by arguing that all historians should be interested in the material foundations of society and therefore not shy away from studying them. And yet it always seemed to me that the most intriguing questions arise when one moves to the more intangible questions of a qualitative kind. This is an *intra*-disciplinary issue as against one of *inter*-disciplinarity. After all, the basic foundation for all these genres is still that of History with its own specific traditions and methods, and ideally I would like to see economic and business history to join the History departments.

By contrast, I am more skeptical of the chances of more *inter*-disciplinary research that is frequently being postulated between the humanities and social sciences. The problem here is that to conduct this kind of research well, its protagonists really need a thorough training in the two or three disciplines in question. It is not enough to pick a few concepts and methods of another discipline and to use them in one's own research. There are of course scholars who have studied two or more disciplines at an advanced level. But it seems to me that most researchers are happy if, in this world of ever more accessible information, they are able to stay on top of developments in one discipline. This does not mean to say that serious dialogue between disciplines is impossible. It is possible, but it requires an openness on the part of the listener and the ability of the other side to explain its own traditions, methods and conceptualizations.

I am more optimistic about the opportunities of comparison within History. At a most basic level it might be argued that all historical writing is implicitly comparative. But in most cases it remains un-articulated because the scholar is focused on a more or less clearly delimited subject. Comparative history has to be explicit and define the parameters of the comparison. Moreover, it is generally accepted that a bilateral comparison may be too narrow. What is needed is a *tertium comparationis* that inevitably expands the scope of the proposed project. This is why some work has been done as an asymmetrical comparison, whereby two cases are discussed in their relationship to a hegemonic one, e.g., Britain and Italy in relation to the United States in the 20th century, whether political, socially, economically, or culturally. This approach has led to a long-standing interest in Transatlantic networks and influences, often seen either as a two-lane highway or as a turntable. This research has benefitted enormously from generous support of exchange programs and publications by public institutions as well as private foundations.

5. The concept of “model”, both in descriptive and/or normative terms, is a constant in your work (be it the export of the “American model” or the models of the German “economic Empire”). Would you illustrate the methodology through which you build or recast such models? Which role social sciences play in this context?

I have been using the term “model” in rather loose, perhaps all too loose terms. It is not a rigid structure, but one within which individual nodes move and thus reshape the complexion of the whole. If this is examined within a particular time-frame the quest is to see what shifts in the configuration have taken place. For example, the industrial structures of Germany evolved over time and were partially destroyed during World War II. But the task after 1945 was not a return

to a pre-war structure i.e., to reconstruct, but also to recast it and to adapt it to the changing and changing conditions of the postwar international economy.

Another case in point would be to approach a particular society and economy in generational terms by studying a cohort of men and women born into a specific era. The task is to observe what generational changes occurred, though scholarship has abandoned the notion that this change takes place every 25-30 years. It seems wiser to assume more rapid change within a shorter time-span, especially in the wake of multiple crises in the twentieth century, and also to observe possible changes not for very large groups, but to choose socio-economic or cultural sub-groups with the aim of identifying communalities within a particular cohort and differences with other contemporaneous ones. In this respect, the social sciences play an important role. They tend to stress the need for conceptualization that historians often neglect at their peril. After all, merely to narrate the primary sources that one has dug up in the archives may result in the telling of more or less relevant stories. But the task is more challenging and should include a discussion of “models” and concepts that allow the reader to see the forest for the trees.