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A Call to Action: Rethinking the Historian's Responsibility in Turbulent Times

The countless crises of our time have forced many, even the previously apolitical, to re-evaluate their roles and responsibilities within contemporary social justice issues. Many historians are becoming increasingly aware of the place of their research within society as a whole. We argue that Social and Economic historians possess the ability to provide essential nuanced long-term perspectives, but that we often lack the reflexivity to critically address our own epistemological assumptions. This often sanitises the connection between the narratives historians write and contemporary crises.

Over twenty years ago Walter Johnson argued that studying past injustices required not only a deep engagement with contemporary injustices, but a complete reassessment of the historical traditions and categories that guide our research.[1] Such a reassessment is still in order if we are to frame our research in relation to tackling ongoing injustices. We argue that there are key themes that Social and Economic Historians must engage in to be able to productively position their research in response to contemporary challenges: modernity, inequality and objectivity.

Modernity

First we must let go of the assumption that the present "differs fundamentally from the past."[2] This framing also persists in social science research and policy narratives. Such subconsciously reproduces harmful notions about progress and growth that divert attention from the legacies of institutions such as colonialism. Our obsession with progress can also ironically hinder our abilities to construct forward-looking alternatives that critically engage with our current institutional structures: David Scott argues we must move from a romantic tale of progress to a post-colonial understanding of tragedy which reveals messy, complex power relations that underpin society as a whole. The power of historians is precisely our ability to look at long-term continuities and discontinuities and draw conclusions about contemporary issues. But this also includes critically engaging with the narratives we create.

Inequality

In the current political climate, even long-standing theoretical concerns such as inequality are increasingly questioned, downplayed, or naturalized. This raises a fundamental problem: when inequality comes to be seen as inevitable or meritocratic, its social and institutional origins disappear from view. Social and economic historians are uniquely positioned to counter this tendency. By tracing how inequalities have emerged, persisted, shifted, or intensified over time, historians expose their contingency rather than visualizing them as inevitable. As social and economic historians, we recognize that inequality is shaped not only by familiar axes such as

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[1] Walter Johnson, 'On Agency', *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003) 113-124.

[2] Leo Lucassen, David Feldman and Jochen Oltmer, 'Immigrant Integration in Western Europe, Then and Now', in: Idem ed., *Paths of Integration*. Migrants in Western Europe (1880-2004) (Amsterdam University Press 2006) 7-24, 9.

social class, sex, gender, or migration history, but also by path-dependent legacies rooted in whose lives were taken into account when developing institutional frameworks. Contemporary housing inequalities, for instance, reflect such legacies, emerging from historically specific configurations of policy, ownership, and institutional design. As historians, we are well-equipped to discuss the institutional histories underpinning contemporary inequalities, and we argue that this constitutes a responsibility rather than a mere option.

Objectivity

Claims to neutrality continue to shape how social and economic historians present their work, often as a marker of scientific legitimacy. Yet historical research is inherently selective and a political act: we make decisions on which themes to study, we manipulate and bring together archival material and we select which statistics to present, thereby we create situated narratives. Scholars in queer, feminist, and postcolonial studies have long abandoned the idea of value-free knowledge, most notably through the concept of situated knowledges[3]. These practices are not new and have already been applied in labor and slavery histories, using the household as a unit of analysis, as a clear example of feminist theory put into methodological practice. We argue that embracing our positionality and reflecting on its influence on our work does not weaken our scholarly contributions or entail abandoning rigor. Rather, it demands transparency, enabling us to challenge both past and current dominant narratives

Looking forward

We need to move beyond outdated methodological and theoretical frameworks and make way for new collaborations that don't fetishise neutrality, objectivity, and progress, or reinforce existing power imbalances. We need radical perspectives and collaborations which cross disciplinary divides and connect history with the immediate world around us. These tools can be found in the many invaluable contributions of post-colonial, queer, feminist and critical theory scholars. When historical context is absent from public debate, narratives of inevitability and novelty gain traction, often obscuring the social and institutional origins of contemporary problems. Historians cannot claim to resolve contemporary conflicts, but we can, *and must,* clarify how present crises are structured by past decisions, institutional choices, and unequal power relations.

[3] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', in: Donna Haraway (ed.), Women, Science, and Technology (London: Routledge 2013) 455–472.