



# **THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY**

**ICHTH Newsletter | No. 4, October 2024**

# WELCOME ADDRESS



By

**Antoon De Baets**  
President of the ICHTH

## MY LITTLE HISTORY CRISIS

I began walking the path of history in 1973 and for decades I had unwavering confidence in the importance of the historical sciences. That is, until 2017, when prompted by the writings of Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Daniel Kahneman, and others, I decided to devote a class to biases in historical writing. In preparation, I delved into my notes on anachronism kept since my student days. Anachronism is a distorting form of retrospection characterized by the impermissible transfer of contemporary objects, concepts, or values to the past. When objects are transferred, anachronism is obvious, but when concepts and values of the present are projected onto the past, things become a little bit more complicated.

I also started reading about the hindsight bias – the influence that knowledge of the outcome of a past situation exerts on a present judgment about that situation. When people act, they usually have several options at their disposal. But normally, historians only see the actual conduct – the outcome – and not the options from which that conduct was chosen. Knowledge of the outcome blocks our understanding of the submerged possibilities and the role of chance that determined the conduct of historical figures. The hindsight bias does not illuminate the past but obscures it.

These insights reignited my much older doubts about the conception of historical truth. Sure, historical truth should be based on the most rigorous conditions of sincerity and accuracy, but we should not remain blind for substantial extra-epistemic influences on its construction. For one, historians are story-tellers. And because they adore telling stories, they start seeing patterns everywhere. More than there really were. This inclination makes our stories fascinating, but does it make them also true? My faith in the value of historical science vanished. The past slipped through my fingers ... if I ever held it. I had phantom pains.

A little later, I also lost my belief in the much touted lessons of history. I realized that two almost opposite obstacles undermine the possibility to learn from the past: the Lucas critique and the prevention paradox. The first – also called the theory of rational expectations – is a critique of macroeconomic policy named after Nobel prize laureate Robert Lucas who was trained as a historian. If we were rational, the argument goes, we would seek to reduce the impact of negative historical events (such as war). And if we did that long enough, these events would diminish and eventually peter out: The lessons would have a self-canceling effect, meaning that historical information would become useless for predicting the future. However, because many

of these negative historical events continue to occur, we must conclude that we are less rational than expected and do not learn (much) from them.

The prevention paradox, in contrast, assumes that it *is* possible to draw lessons from the past. But paradoxically, if lessons from the past effectively prevent negative events, the crimes and suffering thus prevented become untraceable. If suffering decreases, how can one then prove that this was the result of such lessons learned in the first place? If the mission is to avoid and prevent the mistakes of the past, positive results often become untraceable, with the risk of skewing the balance negatively. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

As the years ticked by, I reconciled myself with the existence of strong biases in the field of history. Sadder and (perhaps) wiser, I now believe that if we stay alert and astute enough, we can temper them to a more or less bearable degree. But the highest that historians, stripped of hubris, can hope for is a humble version of the past.

Yet I believe that the greatest potential contribution of history – and by extension of historiography and philosophy of history – to society lies elsewhere. Our humble but tested versions of history – and our sustained reflection on them – can help create a responsible historical awareness in wider circles. They can kindle the collective ability to locate current events in a sound long-term perspective.

Astronomer Royal Martin Rees wrote that the Earth has a lifespan of nine billion years. Roughly speaking, we are now halfway. So we do well to roll up our sleeves. To survive, the planet needs every available brain, also in the field of history. As Roman Krznaric wrote, we should learn how to become good ancestors. I hope that the mission of our Commission – all proportions taken into account – fits somehow into that megaproject. If it does not, what is it worth? It's as in that old joke. From within the forest, two beavers are looking at a vast hydro-electric dam afar. Says one beaver to the other: "I didn't actually build it, but it's based on my idea." I wished that we could be these beavers from time to time.

## COMMISSION NEWS

- Our Commission has had a **Constitution** since 2017. It can be consulted at <https://www.ichth.net/constitution>. On 22 February 2024, the ICHTH Board decided that the text of a new Constitution will be put on the agenda of the next ICHTH General Assembly for a vote on approval with its unanimous recommendation. In the meantime, the President welcomes comments from ICHTH members on the new texts, which you can find here: <https://www.ichth.net/archive/31.pdf>. Please send your comments to [antoondebaets@ichth.net](mailto:antoondebaets@ichth.net).
- All ICHTH members can nominate **candidates** for our Commission. The procedure is very simple and involves filling out a small nomination form that can be found at <https://www.ichth.net/membership>. Alternatively, candidates can also apply for membership themselves. A small application form can be found at <https://www.ichth.net/membership> as well. At regular intervals, the ICHTH Board evaluates all nominations and applications and invites those approved for membership.
- The ICHTH website has a page with **links**: <https://www.ichth.net/links>. The page includes links to international networks, collective works, journals, blogs, and book series in our field. For practical reasons, the page excludes links to works of individual authors or initiatives of merely national scope, but please send any other suggestions to [info@ichth.net](mailto:info@ichth.net).



- Have you been an ICHTH member for many years and are you in the possession of ICHTH documents or ICHTH records from the past? If so, we might publish these records and documents on our **archives** page: <https://www.ichth.net/archive>. Please send them to [info@ichth.net](mailto:info@ichth.net)

# MEMBERS' ANNOUNCEMENTS

## NEW PUBLICATIONS

### Zhang Zuocheng, Northeast Normal University.

- Zhang Zuocheng, “On Historical Time: From the Perspective of Comparison between Chinese and Western Historiography”, *Tianjin Social Sciences*, 2/2024, pp.149-163.

- Zhang Zuocheng, “An Analysis and Discussion of the Totality of Ancient Chinese Historical Thinking in Comparative Context of China and the West”, *Journal of Historical Science*, 4/2024, pp. 127-136.

### Ewa Domańska, Adam Mickiewicz University.

- Ewa Domańska, *A História para além do humano* [History Beyond the Human], trans. Taynna Marino and Hugo Merlo, eds. Julio Bentivoglio and Taynna Marino. (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getulio Vargas Press, 2024).

- Ewa Domańska, Katarzyna Bojarska, Piotr Filipkowski, Jacek Malczynski, Luiza Nader (eds.), *Knowledge in the Shadow of Catastrophe*. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Schönningh, 2024), pp.343.

- Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Humanistyka w epoce antropocenu* [Humanities in the Anthropocene Epoch], eds. Ewa Domańska and Malgorzata Sugiera. (Cracow: Universitas, 2023), pp. 430.

- Ewa Domańska and Alexandra Staniewska (eds.), *Ekshumacje polityczne: teoria i praktyka*

[Political Exhumations: Theory and Practice]. (Gdansk-Lubin: *slowo/obraz terytoria*; Muzeum Historyczne w Lubinie, 2023), pp. 729.

- Ewa Domańska, Robert Doran, Jakub Muchowski, Herman Paul, Kalle Philainen & Miguel Valderrama, “The Ethics of Narrative: a Readers’ Dialogue,” *Rethinking History*, 10 July 2024, DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2024.2357967 (online first)

### Jonathan Lamb Gorman, Queen’s University, Belfast.

- Review Essay “Conceptual Engineering for Historians,” accepted for publication in the *Journal of Philosophy of History*. (Forthcoming)

### Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, Howard University, Washington DC

- Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Re-Envisioning the African and American Academies*. (CODESRIA Book Series, 2024).

### Sandra Mass, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

- Sandra Mass, *Future Pasts: Writing History in the Anthropocene*, Gottingen 2024.

### Vilmos Erös, University of Debrecen, Institute for History

- Helytörténet, népiségtörténet, agrártörténet: Szabo István (1898-1969), in *Magyar Tudomány*, 185 (2024). Június. 806-814.

- Szabo István (1898-1969), in: *Korunk*, 2024, április, 64-76.

- Történelem és filozófia és antiszemitizmus: Mályusz Elemér szellemi-történelmi 19. százada. In: *Történelmi Szemle*, 2024/2. 91-110.

- A “harmadik út” gondolata az 1945 utáni Magyar agrár történetírásban. In: *Valóság*, 2024/8. augusztus. 9-25

# CONFERENCE NEWS

- **Report of the INTH Conference**

From 21 to 24 May, 2024, the fifth conference of the International Network for Theory of History (INTH) was held in Lisbon. At least 35 ICHTH members (out of currently 139) were present and very active in all sorts of roles, most with several hats. The ICHTH had three panels at the conference, for the organization of which Marnie Hughes-Warrington and Daniel Woolf as co-Program Chairs were responsible.

In addition, the ICHTH and the INTH jointly awarded the 2024 ICHTH-INTH

**Best Book Prize Award:** Jorg van Norden, *Verlust der Vergangenheit: Historische Erkenntnis und Materialität zwischen Wiedererkennen und Befremden* (Frankfurt am Mainz: Wochenschau Verlag, 2022).

**Shortlisted:** Christophe Bouton, *L'Acceleration de l'histoire: Des Lumières à l'anthropocene* (Paris: Seuil, 2022).

**Shortlisted:** Gunnar Schumann, *Historical Explanation: An Anti-Causalist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2023).

They also awarded 2024 ICHTH-INTH Best **First Book Prize Award:**

Mariana Imaz-Sheinbaum, *Historical Narratives: Constructable, Evaluable, Inevitable* (New York and London: Routledge, 2024).

Please also see <https://www.ichth.net/prize> and <https://www.inth.ugent.be/index.php/node/147187>.

ICHTH is much indebted to the Prize Committee consisting of Berber Bevernage, Lizette Jacinto, Lize Kriel, and Marek Tamm for all their work.

The cooperation between INTH and ICHTH was very smooth and we hope that we can continue and strengthen it.

- **Report on the Global History Conference**

Submitted by

Daniel Woolf and Amitava Chowdhury

The conference [Global History: Remapping Categories and Concepts](#) convened at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada for two full days of meetings October 3 and 4. Organized by the [Queen's Global History Initiative](#) with the help of a generous grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canada, the meetings were coordinated by two ICHTH members Amitava Chowdhury and Daniel Woolf, both of the Queen's History Department, assisted by PhD candidate Heather Poussard and a team of doctoral, masters and undergraduate students.

The twelve invited speakers, 9 of whom traveled to Kingston and 3 of whom presented online via Zoom included (in alphabetical order): Sven Beckert (Harvard); Maxine Berg (Warwick and Oxford); ICHTH board member Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chicago); Jo Guldi (Emory); ICHTH board member Marnie Hughes-Warrington (U of South Australia); Stefan Link (Dartmouth); David MacDonald (Guelph); Julia McClure (Glasgow); John R. McNeill (Georgetown); ICHTH board member Allan Megill (Virginia); Heather Streets Salter (Northeastern); and Heidi

Tworek (UBC). Full papers or summaries were pre-circulated, and audience members (both in person and online) attended the hour-long sessions, each of which consisted of a summary of their paper by the speaker followed by questions and discussion.

The conference emerged from the organizers' conviction that global history, in light of recent historiographical developments and advances in related fields, urgently requires renewal and rethinking. This shift compels us to reconsider what can and cannot be known, as well as how—and by whom—it should be studied and written. Subjects included the relationship between global history, world history, and planetary history; the long history of the global environment as a subject for historical inquiry; coming trends in global indigenous history and indigenous reconciliation; the ethical implications of artificial intelligence and possibility of "machine-made" history; the place of the local within the global; the nature and influence of capitalism; the state as an agent in global history; the use of digital tools and large data sets to analyze issues such as land occupancy and ownership globally; and the current position of the field within history departments and academic journals.

The presentations and discussions have been recorded and will be available soon. It is hoped that the conference will lead both to publication of revised versions of the papers and future meetings of this kind.



*Above: speakers, organizers and student assistants at the GHI conference, Queen's University*



# HISTORICAL PROJECTS

- “Historical Futures” Project in *History and Theory*

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm, in cooperation with the journal *History and Theory*, initiated a new collective research and editorial project in January 2021. This project was dedicated to mapping the new modalities of historical futures to develop an understanding of our current historical predicament that transcends disciplinary and methodological boundaries. The plan was for each issue of the journal (except for its December theme issues) to feature project contributions on a rolling basis, akin to a television series format for scholarly publishing. At the start, they envisioned a running time of two years, with optional yearly renewals. Now, at the end of its fourth year, the project leaders have decided to conclude the collective endeavour in order to be able to provide a comprehensive overview of the project’s work and achievements. Simon and Tamm’s synthesis, in the shape of the closing essay of the series, will be published in the September issue of *History and Theory*, and is already available in open access ahead of print at the journal’s online platform: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/hith.12352>.

The authors of the “Historical Futures” contributions had full freedom in selecting the topic and format of their articles. They explored various modalities of historical futures as they appear across a wide range of societal practices and discourses (from the algorithmic governance of everyday lives to the anticipated futures of Earth System transformations and their sociopolitical underpinnings) and/or contributed to refining the theoretical framework of the whole endeavor.

To facilitate the collective work, Simon and Tamm provided initial conceptual input. In addition to defining the concept of “historical futures,” they argued that contemporary technoscientific and anthropocenic historical futures possess a new quality. To capture this new quality conceptually, they proposed the notion of “disconnective futures,” a term intended to describe a relationship between apprehended pasts and anticipated futures that was inconceivable to modernity.

In total, twelve articles were published in the series by scholars from various disciplines and across the globe, alongside the opening and closing pieces by the series’ editors. Exceeding initial expectations, the contributions demonstrated considerable thematic, disciplinary, methodological, and geographic diversity in their explorations of historical futures’ modalities. They examined a broad range of societal practices and discourses (ranging from speculative philosophies of history to AI, geology, literature, Zapatista experiences, Amerindian indigenous knowledges, and transhumanist aspirations to precision medicine) to trace historical futures. All project articles, most of them available as open access, are available on the website of *History and Theory*: <https://historyandtheory.org/historical-futures>.

# PERSONAL NEWS AND HONOURS

## Antoon De Baets, University of Groningen

- During a conference organized by the Nobel-prize winning historical organization Memorial in Berlin, Antoon De Baets was invited to tell a historical anecdote. This brief video (2'53), "Historians as cloud-dwellers", can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-Bxba5eMjs>

## Ewa Domanska, Adam Mickiewicz University

- 2024- MEMBER Academia Europaea.
- 2024- Reinhart Koselleck guest Professor (Center for Theories in Historical Research, Bielefeld University).
- 2024- Polish Civil State Decoration: The Gold Cross of Merit for achievements in scientific research, organizational efforts, and the promotion of historical knowledge.
- 2024- Polish State Decoration: The Medal for Long Service (gold).

# UPCOMING EVENTS

- Antoon De Baets has started editorial work on **The Palgrave Handbook of Attacks on History**, scheduled for publication in early 2027. All information about this project, including a draft introduction, timeline and provisional table of contents, can be found at <https://www.concernedhistorians.org/handbook>. Please do not hesitate to suggest names and email addresses of strong potential contributors to [a.h.m.de.baets@rug.nl](mailto:a.h.m.de.baets@rug.nl).
- The 15<sup>th</sup> European Social Science History (ESSHC) will be held in Leiden, The Netherlands, from 26<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> March 2025. The Network ICHTH Theory and Historiography is chaired by Stefan Berger, Victoria Fareld and Kenan Van De Mieroop, all of them ICHTH members. For more information, go to <https://esshc.iisg.amsterdam/en>.

## Vilmos Erős, University of Debrecen, Institute for History

[Planned Conference participations/presentations, 2024/2025 with accepted applications:]

- Gótika, felvilágosodás és antiszemitizmus: a szellemtörténész Mályusz Elemér. III. Nemzetközi Historiográfiai Konferencia, III. International Conference in Historiography, Debrecen, DE, Történelmi Intézet, 2024. November 21-23.
- From Gleichschaltung to Reprofessionalisation. Hungarian Historical Writing after 1948. III. Nemzetközi Historiográfiai Konferencia, III. International Conference in Historiography, Debrecen, DE, Történelmi Intézet, 2024. November 21-23.
- "The distinction between 'mind' and 'reason' and its implications for a responsible history (with special regard to public history). European Social Science Conference, Leiden 2025. March 26-29
- "British and German Historiographical Receptions in Hungarian History Writing around 1900". "New Reflections on Historiographical Interactions and Networks between British and German Historians from the Early Nineteenth century to the Present". (Workshop, Institute for Social Movements of Ruhr University-Bochum, 18-20. September 2025.)



## International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography BOARD

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Follow ICHTH activities on the website: <https://www.ichth.net>

ICHTH Members are requested to pay their annual fees. For more information about annual fees, write to [info@ichth.net](mailto:info@ichth.net)

**ICHTH Newsletter No. 5 is scheduled for February 2025. A call for submission of news items shall be made in November 2024.**

ICHTH Newsletters Nos.1, 2 and 3 can be read at:

No.1 – [ <https://www.ichth.net/news/9.pdf> ]

No.2– [ <https://www.ichth.net/news/18.pdf> ]

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