

# Uses of the Past in Past Societies: a Global Perspective

Venue: British Academy, 10-11 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AH

Tuesday 11 June 2013 9am - 5.30pm

Wednesday 12 June 2013 9.15am – 5.30pm

## Conference Programme

### Day 1

9:00 Registration

9:20 Welcome, Dr Peter Lambert and Professor Björn Weiler

#### Session 1: History and the Past

Just as there are competing concepts as to what kind of past should be remembered, so there are competing concepts as to the means by which reconstructions of the past can be communicated, and the kind of uses to which it may be put. Such debates, often centred on questions of truthfulness, and they sought to define what exactly was a legitimate historical source. These are recurrent questions, to be asked anew by each generation of scholars. At the same time, any such engagement will profit from a broader chronological and geographical understanding of past solutions and debates.

Drawing on a wide range of materials— court and government records, monuments and paintings, as well as oral testimony – the papers in this session explore how past societies have engaged, and how they sought to resolve, these fundamental questions. Only once a past has been defined as worth remembering, and the means have been selected with which that past can be uncovered and remembered, was a society able to put it to use.

**Moderator:** Professor Dame Janet Nelson, King's College, University of London

#### a) Practising History

**9:30 Professor Dana Leibsohn (Smith College),** Materiality and Memory: Indigenous Histories after the Conquest of Mexico

**10:00 Professor Richard Kagan (Johns Hopkins University),** The Chronicler and the Count: Law, Libel, and History in the Early Modern Atlantic World

**10:30 Discussion**

11:00 Break

#### b) Defining the Past

**11:30 Professor Frederick Corney (College of William and Mary),** *Damnatio memoriae*: Constructing a Pre-revolutionary Past in Soviet Russia

**12:00 Professor Joanne Rappaport (Georgetown University),** Participatory Research and the Construction of a Communal Memory: La Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social in Colombia

**12:30 Discussion**

13:00 Lunch

## **Session 2: History, Politics and Language**

For history to be used, it had to be known. When history was also a learned activity, especially when scholarship was associated with languages other than the vernacular, this posed problems to authors and readers alike. The problem has particular resonance in humanities outside the English speaking world, where academic writing – in English – is increasingly divorced from the language of a larger domestic public that scholars might seek to address.

The first two papers in this session will explore what a shift in language could mean for how history was recorded, the themes pursued and communicated, and what the use of a particular language can tell us about a society's concept of history. The second group of papers treats two recurring phenomena. On the one hand, there is the role of history as a means of instruction as well as record, of an attempt to collate sources and use their content to construct a useful image of the past. On the other hand, there often were conflicting discourses about what the past meant, what parts of it could be used, and to what ends.

**Moderator:** Dr Geoffrey Cubitt, University of York

a) The Language of History

**14:00 Dr Haki Antonsson (University College London),** The Sagas of the Icelanders: their Reflections and Uses of the Past

**14:30 Professor Allison Busch (Columbia University),** The Poetry of History: Mughal Power in Early Modern Hindi Literature

**15:00 Discussion**

15:30 Break

b) History and Power

**16:00 Dr Dimitris Kastritsis (University of St Andrews),** The Sultan's Shifting Image: Changing Representations of Kingship and Politics in Ottoman Historical Narratives of the 15th c. CE

**16:30 Professor Lucy Riall (European University Institute),** The Ghost of Italy Past: History and the Making of Modern Italy

**17:00 Discussion**

17:30 Finish Day 1

Day 2

### **Session 1: Uses of the Past**

All societies sought to construct a useful past. Yet what does this actually mean in practice? Having considered the general context within which constructions of a useful past could be established, this and the following session will discuss more specific issues. Were there, for instance, differences between how the very distant past could be used, and more recent events? Did temporal distance increase or diminish the usefulness of that past? How did these concepts change over time, between cultures and media? And how exactly did societies and writers decide on which uses they would focus?

**Moderator:** Dr Antonio Sennis, University College London

a) Uses of the Distant Past

**9:15 Professor Dimitrios Krallis (Simon Fraser University),** Reading Rome in Medieval Constantinople: Culture, Politics, and the Roman Past in the Middle Byzantine Period

**9:45 Dr Peter Lambert (Aberystwyth University),** The proximity of a remote past: the afterlives of Charlemagne and Widukind in Nazi Germany

**10:15 Discussion**

10:45 Break

b) Uses of the Recent Past

**11:15 Professor Ilana Gershon (University of Indiana, Bloomington),** Creating Maori Seats in the New Zealand Colonial Parliament: Historical Arguments in Support of the 1867 Maori Representation Act

**11:45 Professor Richard Rathbone (Aberystwyth University),** Memory as theatre; using a Ghanaian ritual to recall past greatness and to redress recent reverses

**12:15 Discussion**

12:45 Lunch

## Session 2: Historians Constructing the Past

Uses of the past were constructed, sought and consumed by a variety of actors: ethnic groups, institutions, trade unions, political parties, etc. Yet the writing of history remains, with very few exceptions, the pursuit of individuals. These did not, of course, operate in a value free zone, immune from the concerns, concepts and expectations of the society around them. As Leibniz had pointed out in the late seventeenth century, our perception of the world beyond ourselves is conditioned by factors as diverse as upbringing, training, language and environment. The final group of papers will consider the variety of ways in which individuals engaged in constructions of the past, how they conformed to, and sometimes even challenged, how they adopted and adapted the expectations of their contemporaries, how they followed and simultaneously refashioned traditions about the past.

**Moderator:** Dr Toby Green, King's College, University of London

**13:45 Professor Björn Weiler (Aberystwyth University),** Uses of the Anglo-Saxon Past in the Age of Magna Carta: Matthew Paris and his *Lives of the Two Offas*

**14:15 Professor Paul M. Cobb (University of Pennsylvania),** An Ottoman Syrian Antiquarian and His Local History of Homs (Emesa)

**14:45 Professor Timothy Barrett (School of Oriental & African Studies, London),** Chinese History as a Constructed Continuity: The Work of Rao Zongyi

15:15 Short Break

**15:25 Discussion**

16:00 Break

**16:30 Roundtable Discussion**

The roundtable will bring together the speakers and moderators, as well as participants from outside academia. Its aims will be threefold: first, to outline, investigate and pursue themes that have emerged during this conference, to clarify points left untouched, to highlight both parallels and differences between uses of the past in so vast and varied a range of cultures and periods. In short, it will do what academic conferences normally do. Second, though, the roundtable will place findings in a broader context. How, for instance, do the phenomena described relate to current practices in heritage, planning, and popular history? Have we been able to delineate patterns that are recognizable to practitioners in heritage and popular history? Finally, the discussion will explore what can be done with this information. What are the possibilities and limitations for collaboration and exchange? What avenues exist to disseminate, discuss and perhaps even revise the findings of this conference? How can a meaningful dialogue be established?

**Moderator:** Speaker to be confirmed

**17:30 Finish**