German Historical Institute
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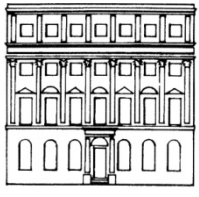

BULLETIN

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Nostalgia: Historicizing the Longing for the Past
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Nostalgia: Historicizing the Longing for the Past. Conference held at the German Historical Institute London, 1–3 Oct. 2015. Convener: Tobias Becker (GHIL).

During the recent economic recession, a new interest in nostalgia—a sentimental yearning for the past—spiked among academics and 'amateurs' alike. At first glance, it seems that when people are confronted with difficulties in the present, they tend to yearn for a seemingly better or simpler life in the past. An increased engagement in recreational activities related to the past supports this hypothesis. In Britain, for instance, we find a flourishing community around historical re-enactments, a growing interest in family history, and a large number of people volunteering for the British National Trust. Since the twentieth century at least, the term nostalgia has commonly been used to describe consumerist practices and media phenomena in addition to recreational activities.

The term 'nostalgia' was coined by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who introduced it as a pathological term for homesickness in his dissertation of 1688. Caused by the absence of the apparently superior air and unique landscape of Switzerland, the disease, it was claimed, affected Swiss people when living and working abroad. According to Hofer, external stimuli such as objects or songs triggered a longing for one's home country. The focus on place is reflected in synonymous words such as 'homesickness', the German *Heimweh*, and the French *maladie du pays*. Only in the twentieth century was the spatial longing transformed into a temporal one.

Until recently, historians (apart from rare exceptions) used the term pejoratively to describe the sentimental interest of non-historians for the past. Over recent decades, psychology, sociology, literature, media, film, cultural studies, and fashion have produced a body of literature on nostalgia. Picking up on the recent interest in the subject, Tobias Becker, Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute London, organized an interdisciplinary conference including not only historians but also representatives of the research areas named above. The conference set out to explore whether and how nostalgia can be historicized. Can nostalgia be described as an anthropological

The full programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

constant? Since when have we felt nostalgic? Who feels nostalgic for what? In short: does nostalgia have a history? And if so, how can we write it?

The conference began with a stimulating keynote lecture delivered by Constantine Sedikides (Southampton), an experimental psychologist who works on nostalgia. He stated that nostalgia had negative connotations and is linked to depression. According to Sedikides's psychological experiments, nostalgia functions as a coping mechanism in negative situations where people experience feelings of loneliness, fear, and depression. Nostalgia provides a meaning for life by reminding people that they are part of a group—a family, a circle of friends—which makes them feel socially connected. Although nostalgia is primarily a backwards-looking emotion, it also has a positive forwards-looking element.

Following Sedikides, the first panel discussed theoretical approaches to nostalgia. Achim Saupe (Potsdam) asked how ideas of nostalgia and authenticity are interconnected. Saupe suggested that 'authenticity' is a value that is attached to objects (for example, in museums) or places (for example, memorial sites), and makes them more credible or truthful 'as apparently direct embodiments of history' (Saupe). The past is completed and unchangeable by comparison with an ongoing, uncertain present (and future). This makes the past more desirable and 'authentic', that is, closer to an assumed original or truth, than the present. In the last third of the twentieth century, self-confirmation of individuality, originality, belonging, and the notion of making sense of things by buying goods became increasingly common. Since the 1980s and 1990s, companies have used the desire for authenticity and trust as a selling point for the credibility of their brands. They cater for people feeling nostalgic by selling new goods that look as if they come from another era, such as retro bicycles.

Romanticizing a 'painful' past seems counter-intuitive. Yet as Ishay Landa (Ra'anana) showed in his paper, a number of critics of modernity expressed a longing for pain to counter a life lived in a state of 'mild satisfaction' at the end of the 'civilizing process' (Norbert Elias). Friedrich Nietzsche described the 'last man' as a squeamish person—lacking the experience and ability to endure pain—who would live a long but meaningless life. Struggle, strife, and heroism, on the other hand, he argued, made life worthwhile.

Fascism used the same rhetoric and put pain back at the centre of things, claiming that living a life in peace is not as valuable as proving oneself in war.

Rogéro Miguel Puga (Lisbon) presented a variant concept of nostalgia as expressed by the Portuguese word *saudade*, the longing for an absent person, thing, or period. The term dates back to the thirteenth century and was revived by the early twentieth-century literary movement 'Saudosismo'. The inability to describe what *saudade* means is shared with other languages, such as the Russian *toska*, the Czech *litnost*, and the Welsh *hiraeth*. According to Puga, all these terms claim to be untranslatable, and thus express a desire for uniqueness. In this presentation, *saudade* or nostalgia was described as an element of a nascent nationalism that worked not only as a political project but also in cultural terms.

The second keynote lecture was delivered by Achim Landwehr (Düsseldorf) who put the 'invention of nostalgia' in 1688 into the context of changing perceptions of time. In his eyes, the Renaissance had no concept of nostalgia because it saw the past as still ongoing. Only the 'birth of the present' in the seventeenth century, that is, the widespread understanding of time as linear and irreversible, turned nostalgia into a collective cultural phenomenon. In the last part of his talk, Landwehr fast-forwarded to the 1970s, which once again saw a rupture in the understanding of time accompanied by a widespread sense of nostalgia. Landwehr conceptualized nostalgia as a temporal contact zone in which present versions of selected pasts are used to shape selected futures, a process Landwehr called 'chronoferencing'.

The second panel focused on 'Political Nostalgia'. Patricia Lorcin (Minneapolis) distinguished between imperial and colonial nostalgia in post-colonial societies in France and Britain. While the former referred to the loss of Empire and hegemonic influence in international power politics, the latter referred to the loss of a colonial lifestyle and socio-economic standing by former settlers. Lorcin highlighted the influence of politics, media, and gender on individual and collective nostalgia. A recent upsurge of nostalgia for the Habsburg Empire was the subject of Manca G. Renko's (Koper) paper. She discussed examples of nostalgia for the dual monarchy, such as *The Kraus Project* (2014) by Jonathan Franzen and Wes Anderson's *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), in which a hotel becomes a nostalgic non-place and safe home that belongs to everyone and no one, enabling its

inhabitants to escape the void of the present. The recent phenomenon of 'Westalgie', in contrast to the better-known 'Ostalgie', was discussed by Owen Malloy (Norwich). Drawing on a recent exhibition in the Stadtmuseum Berlin and referring to tours through West Berlin in VW Beetles, as opposed to Trabis in East Berlin, advertised by travel agencies, Malloy made a case that the old, stable Federal Republic has supplanted the GDR as an object of nostalgia.

Turning from a longing for a specific place in time to a longing for a certain mode of life and work, the third panel looked at 'Industrial Nostalgia'. In focusing on the losses rather than gains of deindustrialization, industrial nostalgia bemoans the loss of the value of manual work and self-definition by 'making things'. A significant shift in post-war Britain was the miners' strike of 1984–5, commonly portrayed as King Coal's heroic but futile resistance to the Thatcher government. Jörg Arnold (Nottingham) argued that the stimulus for action was disappointment that an anticipated economically stable future never arrived, rather than the loss of an industrial past per se. Following a similar train of thought, Tim Strangleman (Canterbury) analysed instances of 'smokestack nostalgia', drawing mainly on coffee table books about unused car plants and former industrial complexes. Often purchased by former workers, they are a way of making sense of the decline of an industrial sector they were once part of. Peter Hörz (Göttingen) presented an ethnographic study of 'rail hikers' who explore shut-down railway lines by walking along them. Hörz understood this practice as play, performance, and pilgrimage through which participants make the past present.

The fourth panel analysed how nostalgia is invoked and produced by the media. As Saupe had already noted, the media sell products by using nostalgic narratives and styles in advertisements. At the same time, the media can simulate past times. Katharina Niemayer (Paris) analysed instances of nostalgia in social media such as Instagram and YouTube, where the immediate present is nostalgically reproduced, prompting her to speak of 'instant nostalgia'. Gintare Malinauskaite (Berlin) focused on Mira Jedwabnik van Doren's documentary *The World Was Ours* (2006), a project largely based on collections of old photographs about the life of Jews in Vilne (the Jewish name for Vilnius, Lithuania). Although Vilnius as a place still exists, returning there is futile. Its Jewish community can only be remembered through photo albums and documentaries. In this logic,

nostalgic feelings for the 'good times' in Vilne serve as a moral reminder that the horrors of the Shoa should never be repeated.

The fifth panel, 'Object Nostalgia', dealt with the material side of nostalgia. Eva C. Heesen (Hanover) addressed the two-sided significance of nostalgia in museums, where nostalgia provides both education and escapism from present realities. The past becomes a canvas on which to project a selective and idealized longing. In practice, when the irreversibility of time creates a safe distance to the past on display, then the objects create an emotional resonance and thus become nostalgia-worthy.

Reinhild Kreis (Mannheim/Vienna) compared two waves of do-it-yourself (DIY). Around 1900, manual work was favoured in opposition to mass-production, while also referring to older notions of gender and generation identity. In the 1970s and 1980s, DIY was discovered by the alternative milieu with the idea of creating a better, more sustainable future because it provided independence from mass production and kept craftsmanship alive. Though drawing on the past, nostalgia acted as a source for reform to create a better future.

The conflict between preserving and destroying historical buildings after the Second World War was examined by Kerstin Stamm (Bonn/Berlin) in her paper on the European Architectural Heritage Year 1975. By then, new modern and mono-functional outskirts had been built while the bombed city centres had been neglected by architects and urban planner. Under the headline 'A Future for Our Past', the conservation movement tried to promote the renovation and preservation of older buildings and districts. Stamm noted that the people who were fighting against modernization and the destruction of old buildings were rarely those who lived in the buildings that they wanted to protect. As they were not affected by change, it was easier for them to feel nostalgic for a particular architectural past.

Karl B. Murr (Augsburg/Munich) reassessed Jean Baudrillard's remarks on nostalgia in his *System of Objects*. According to Baudrillard, modern Western societies define themselves more through consumerism than industrial production. In this context, objects are 'consumed' not only because of their functionality, but because of their secondary meanings, their 'sign value'. Consequently, Baudrillard criticizes the authenticity of the object and the discourse of historical reality.

David Lowenthal (London), author of *The Past Is A Foreign Country*, concluded the conference by making some general comments. He attributed the spread of a nostalgic yearning for the past since the 1970s to the fact that the past is over and unchangeable and therefore emits a sense of stability, authenticity, and familiarity that the present for many people seems to lack. The following plenary discussion highlighted that nostalgia remains an elusive phenomenon. This makes it difficult to apply the term analytically. But as the conference showed, nostalgia can (and needs to) be studied historically. Historians can learn from other disciplines and must overcome their prejudices regarding nostalgia. After all, more people encounter the past through nostalgic phenomena and practices than through historiographical studies.

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