World History: Something new under the sun? Glimpses of the U.S.-American development

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The history of world historical studies, in the U.S. (but also in Europe) is currently told in two ways: on the one hand it is said to be a new field, established as both teaching subject and research area in the 1970s and on the horizon of the historical profession since the 1980s, at the earliest. At the same time it is presented as having a century long tradition, in fact reaching back to antiquity. In most accounts the inherent contradiction is dissolved by a caesura, the last third of the 20th century, at which thoroughly new approaches replaced older ones. Those who stress the driving role of individuals usually highlight William McNeill’s ‘Rise of the West’. Those emphasizing institutional developments accentuate the ‘world history movement’ that gained shaped among others by the founding of the World History Association in 1982.

Yet, how convincing is the notion of a recent renewal, especially when it is based on the proposition of a sharp break and sudden turn-about? After all, scientific innovations and intellectual renewal usually develop slowly. New grounds are predated by phases at which established formats and securities become questionable, a need for new directions is articulated, first by few then by many voices leading to trial and error, in which alternatives gain shape. In the light of this pattern, I took a closer look at the practice of world history teaching in the U.S. from the moment the ‘Western Civilization’-narrative was established in the 1910s and 1920s until the late 1960s. Instead of a precisely datable and abrupt change I found multifaceted efforts of conceptual renewal. In the four decades following World War I, undergraduate and graduate teaching became an arena for the confrontation with the pitfalls of the 19th century universal histories, with its Eurocentric, holistic and metaphysical grounding.

In my talk I will present glimpses of this process in which the criteria for current world history writing were established: among others the recognition of diversity, the replacement of metaphysical grounding with attention to empirical evidence, and recognition of the equality of the non-European past. Rather than accentuating the role of few outstanding scholars and their writings I will concentrate on institutional dynamics, the emergence of ‘general education’, the renewing power of the doctorate and the impact of philanthropic foundations.