

Introduction: What Sort of Past Does Our Future Need?



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Abstract In this short introduction we set out the aims of the volume, which represents the fruits of two seminars held in the autumn of 2020. The chapters respond to one big thematic issue: how to research and understand historical societal resilience; and one big question: what sort of past does the future need? They attempt to address these through three linked themes: can history be made more relevant to modern policy in respect of environmental and climate challenges? To what extent do our various sources indicate awareness and management of risk and/or the implementation of mitigating strategies in the past? And how can we identify ‘resilience’ in the social praxis of historical agents?

Keywords Resilience · Agency · Risk · Complexity · Societal perceptions · Mitigation

The histories we tell never emerge in a vacuum, and history as an academic discipline that studies the past is highly sensitive to the concerns of the present and the heated debates that tear apart entire societies. But does the study of the past also have something to teach us about the future? Can history help us in coping—on different levels: philosophical, psychological, scientific, socio-economic, socio-technological...—with the planetary crisis we are now facing? Does history in the Anthropocene have a new task, does it need to change? Can it help us in facing the current pandemic and finding ways out of the post-Covid crisis that is looming on the horizon? By

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analyzing historical societies as complex adaptive systems, we contribute to contemporary thinking about societal-environmental interactions in policy and planning and consider how environmental and climatic changes, whether sudden high impact events or more subtle gradual changes, impacted human responses in the past. We ask how societal perceptions of such changes affect behavioral patterns and explanatory rationalities in premodernity, and whether a better historical understanding of these relationships can inform our response to contemporary problems of similar nature and magnitude, such as adapting to climate change.

This collection of papers is drawn from the presentations delivered in two linked seminars at Princeton University and at the Berlin Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Science in the autumn of 2020. The first addressed a range of issues connected with societal resilience under the rubric “Past answers to current concerns. Approaches to understanding historical societal resilience”; the second addressed the question: “What sort of past does the future need?” This volume, therefore, addresses both sets of questions and topics by bringing together a team of scholars in the humanities, the social and the natural sciences, based in Germany, Austria, Poland, the UK, the USA and Canada. Together, we reflect on how looking into the past can help us cope with the present and prepare for the future. The question of the extent to which a better understanding of the ways in which past societies dealt with environmental and climatic challenges might inform our response to contemporary problems of a similar nature and magnitude—such as adapting to climate change—remains the focus of a good deal of discussion. Yet it is still the case that the history invoked in this debate often tends towards a simplified and reductionist interpretation of the past. One of the aims of this collection is to look at how societal perceptions of significant change affected behaviors and explanatory rationalities in premodernity. Another is to try to build complexity and multi-causality into our understanding of past examples of how different cultures coped with such stresses, with a view to isolating key structural elements that either facilitate or jeopardise resilience or sustainability.

Our collection of papers sets out to address these issues by approaching them through three key themes. First we ask whether a better historical understanding of past responses to significant threats to people’s environment and the world they inhabited can help contemporaries better grapple with comparable risks and challenges today. Can we draw lessons that are not bound to the national, ethnic, geographical, historical etc. context in which our case studies unfold? In short, can history be made more relevant to modern policy with regard to such challenges? Secondly, we wanted to think about ‘threat awareness’ in the past. To what extent is there any indication or evidence for awareness and management of risk and/or the implementation of mitigating strategies in historical societies? Did people in the society/societies in question perceive or understand major risks or challenges as such, and how did they react/respond? Or rather, were reactions random, contingent, or at times even dysfunctional or socially exclusive, leading to increased conflict? And finally, we ask about how to highlight the differences in resilience or sustainability as perceived by us, as external observers, and as perceived by different groups and agents within the

society in question? In other words, how is 'resilience' or its absence to be identified in agents' social behaviors?

The impacts of environmental stress on past societies are still poorly understood, although there is a good deal of information on the eventual results of such impacts in terms of political change and transformation. But what constitutes an existential risk to a given historical society—a risk that could trigger the collapse of a political or cultural system—has to be approached from two angles: that of the external observer; and that of the people who lived through those changes. Past human societies as a whole have been remarkably resilient in the face of severe challenges. They were well able to manage known environmental risks—seasonal challenges resulting from poor weather, for example, occasional flooding or short-term drought. Explanations for such events, and ways of mitigating their impacts, were part of the annual cycle of life. Other, less predictable threats—such as earthquakes or floods—were events that could be mitigated on a limited scale. Major instances of any of these could overburden a society's capacity to absorb the shock, but not necessarily bring about a permanent transformation or breakdown of a system. But just as important were 'internal' factors, the underlying dynamics and systemic constraints and capacities of a given society—both in terms of conflicts between different sets of vested interests as well as in terms of the degree of flexibility in the environmental situation of the society as a whole. Different sets of social and political structures were impacted, and responded, in many different ways, with implications for the developments that ensued—compare the different medium-term outcomes of the Black Death in England and France, illustrative of socio-environmental asymmetries in which different degrees of socio-political complexity and population density precondition the potentials for inherent resilience under stress.

We would argue that with the right questions and appropriate research, historical case studies can offer valuable guidance on present-day issues in designing risk management strategies and sustainable policies. The study of complex historical societies can reveal how past societal and environmental challenges worked to transform structural relationships and daily life. It can also tell us about what happened when the dust settled and how different levels of society re-evaluated their situations. Key terms in the discussion include that of 'resilience'. In historical research it has been invoked most commonly in the context of research on collapse and adaptation, where societies are understood as complex adaptive systems (a concept drawn ultimately from Ecology). Since the basic structural dynamics of a societal system contribute to the types of collapse to which it may be subject, approaches to collapse and resilience that unite structure and process are the best way forward in applying historical examples to contemporary planning initiatives with respect to environmental problems.

Crucial for understanding any society is the role of human agency and belief systems, a facet often ignored in general accounts of historical societal collapse. In his famous presidential address to the American Historical Association from 1931, entitled *Everyman His Own Historian*, Carl Becker tried to reduce history to its core, to what he called its 'lowest terms'. It took him no more than a couple of sentences to formulate an ultra-short definition of history—as 'memory of things said and done'.

However surprising and controversial this simplification might sound, it seems to grasp most of historiographical production of the last century, both academic and non-academic. Let's put aside the notion of memory in Becker's definition, which is very broad and covers what we would rather call historical knowledge. But let's consider "things said and done" for a moment. Indeed, if you take randomly a couple of historical books from any library shelves or a bookstore—in the USA, Poland, Germany or elsewhere, you would most probably immediately realize that they narrate (his)stories of human affairs by reconstructing what people (as individuals or collectives) did or said. Where 'did' also means experience—that is endure, suffer, cope with.... And where 'said' is often understood performatively as a kind of action, too. Thus history is—in Becker's provocation and in common-sense understanding alike—limited to human affairs. Looked at from the outside: no humans-no history.

If we recall our history lessons at school, or maybe also the textbooks we used, we would probably realize that most of what we were taught was not about humans as such, but about groups of people, usually called 'nations', and even more about their ruling elites—kings, queens, dukes, governors, generals, bishops and priests, or even simply 'the people', personified as a simple (and simplistic) monolith. These people were 'doing politics' (often by saying different things), and it was for the most part only within such historical-political frameworks that societies and their particular classes or other social groups were mentioned, including the underprivileged and the underrepresented. Social and cultural history that privileged a bottom-up perspective tried to rescue them from historiographical oblivion—not without success, although varying from one country and educational system to another. Thus history split into 'political' and 'socio-cultural', where the former concentrated on 'facts', while the latter rather preferred talking of human 'experiences'. What mediated between the two was economic history: full of numbers, it looked more scientific and serious, though remained one more story of human affairs. A very particular variety of the 'experience' approach was—and still is—the history of the Holocaust (and other Genocides) which privileged, for good ethical reasons, victims' perspectives. Much of post-Second World War European historiography, for example, was driven more by the moral impulse to 'remember', than by the pure need to know (if the latter can be said to exist at all).

Carl Becker was well aware that his definition of history is very much, if not entirely, focused on one aspect only of an equation that is fundamental for most philosophies of history, namely the relationship between the real world in the past—or past reality as such—and its narrative (or any other) representation. History as 'memory of things said and done' was concentrated on the side of representation. Becker's address (which also dealt with other fundamental historiographical issues) was often interpreted as controversial and 'relativistic' (the term 'postmodernist' was coined some decades later but would fit here perfectly).

From the perspective of environmental history that informs much of the writing in this volume, however, Becker's nutshell definition of history seems to be both a realistic and a very sober description of the practise of the most of field so far. What

then changes—on this basic definitional level—with our environmental extension of historiography?

To put it as simply as possible: the relationship between past reality (*res gestae* in the philosophy of history) and the human story about it (respectively: *historia rerum gestarum*) must be conceptualised anew. It is not simply a case of bringing new sources and data to bear (though this is already a great deal and often judged sufficient in historical research). It is much more a radical revision of the ‘essence’ of historical fact as such. Facts, in environmental history, are no longer just to do with the record of human affairs. They must now be embedded in ‘nature’, itself no longer merely the stage upon which the theatre of human actions and reactions plays out, but an important and indeed irreplaceable historical actor in its own right.

From now on: No nature—no human history.

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