



«meta-renaissance(s)» - 53rd Basler Renaissancekolloquium

Outline

From its onset – and not merely in the Burckhardtian tradition – Renaissance scholarship has been inextricably linked to the genesis of cultural as universal history: an *histoire totale* of methods and perspectives giving rise to a comprehensive representation of the social. From an historiographical point of view, Renaissance history thus also represents an important chapter in the genesis of global history as an interdisciplinary field of historical inquiry.

With respect to the European Renaissance, the most trodden paths of global contextualization have been carved out by the history of entanglements and (global) intellectual history. By contrast, a comparatively neglected, yet perhaps not less promising attempt to globalise (and thus, by extension, ‘provincialise’) both the European historical experience and its related areas of scholarship is to understand the Renaissance as a generic historical and historiographical model – a causality of circumstances spurring a comprehensive social movement that is (purportedly) based on a reorientation towards prior traditions.

The 53rd Basel Renaissance Colloquium hence sets out to explore Renaissance history from a diachronic and pan-regional perspective. Our starting point is to conceive of the (or rather, a) Renaissance as a structure of social developments, phenomena, and practices that can be identified and compared across temporal and, above all, spatial boundaries – thus potentially forming a globally applicable pattern of historical analysis. The ensuing notion of Meta-Renaissance builds on and extends existing discourses of decentralization that can be approached from established angles of Renaissance scholarship as well as global history: which combination of (economic, demographic, broadly cultural) circumstances – if any – tend to induce and/or incentivise social processes of reorientation? How and when can such processes result in original or progressive outcomes as opposed to mere retrospection or collective nostalgia? What is the role of interregional and global connectivities in instigating dynamics of confrontation or emulation? Does the concept of Renaissance describe a tangible historical phenomenon at all, and, if so, one whose occurrence can be meaningfully explained and compared – or even predicted?

meta renaissance(s) thus invites to attempt a re-conceptualisation of the Renaissance as a global phenomenon that is explicitly not fixed in either space or time. The meeting is intended as an interdisciplinary forum open to (and seeking to combine) perspectives from e.g. social, political, intellectual, and art history, and/or the (global) history of institutions. We are particularly interested in comparative and/or connected approaches as well as in thematic contributions relating to the use and misuse of historical patterns, the emergence and spread of ideas and artistic practices, narratives and imaginaries of statehood, and the construction and social differentiation of collective identities and forms of belonging, among others.

The colloquium will allow for individual presentations of about 30 minutes in length, followed by questions and a final roundtable discussion.



Abstracts

*Noémie Etienne (Vienna): **The Elephant in the Fondue: A Swiss (Re)naissance and the Entanglement of Spaces***

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a great number of non-European artefacts were brought to Switzerland as sought-after collection items, stemming in particular from Asia, the Americas, and Oceania. In this talk, I will focus on the links forged by people living in the territory of today's Switzerland with the rest of the world during the early modern period. I will highlight a dual movement: the invention of a "distant elsewhere" through international travel, and of a "near elsewhere" formed in the eyes of Swiss elites regarding local mountain populations. These combined phenomena led to an unprecedented development of local arts and crafts, boosted by contemporary colonial and commercial expansions and the related inflow of objects and animals. Put differently, it led to a Helvetian (Re)naissance based on a collision of spaces and times. The images and objects held in Swiss archives, libraries, and museums, which form my initial source base, necessarily represent only an incomplete corpus as they reflect the priorities of the institutions that preserved them. Nevertheless, they are traces of a complex history that links the Confederacy to territories outside Europe, thus also adding an important layer to our understanding of the origins and inspirations of early modern European creative movements.

*Giuseppe Marcocci (Oxford): **Meta-Renaissance and Empire***

Empire lies at the core of the European Renaissance and hence provides fertile ground for testing the notion of Meta-Renaissance. Traditional Renaissance scholarship related its emergence to small states, eventually informing a master narrative that depicted political fragmentation as a distinctive feature of early modern Europe and a major reason behind its purportedly exceptional role in world history. More recently, the Renaissance has come to be understood as a regional phenomenon that took place in a world shaped by the rise of empires globally. Thus, scholars increasingly discuss how far the Renaissance was shaped from outside Europe or imposed on other continents. They also investigate more carefully the close link between the Renaissance and Europe's own overseas empires, which gave special significance to the reorientation towards Ancient Rome as a fundamental inspiration for imperial vision and political legitimacy.

This paper speculates on meta-renaissance as a notion that may explain the creative appropriation and reactivation of historical precedents, symbols, and values ascribed to previous imperial traditions as a structural characteristic of many societies engaging in new projects of empire across time and space. Can it be argued that not every empire entailed a renaissance, but many renaissances were entangled with empires and their cultural foundations in specific ways? To answer this question, an experiment will be attempted by comparing three empires that rose and developed in isolation from each other at roughly the same time as, but independently from, the European Renaissance: the Vijayanagara empire in South India, the Songhai empire in West Africa, and the so-called Aztec empire led by the Mexica in Mesoamerica. Examining their sophisticated cultures and attitudes towards the past, I will assess whether their trajectories show a common renaissance element.



Ralph Weber (Basel): *Meta-Renaissance between Concept and Global Phenomenon: Remarks on the Politics of Chinese Renaissance(s)*

The efforts to extend the concept of Renaissance to capture more global phenomena and to challenge Eurocentric narratives rely nolens volens on more or less explicit comparative settings. Drawing on prior work about the philosophy of comparison, I will lay out what is at stake when introducing Meta-Renaissance as a framework through which to think a more global history. Against this theoretical background, I will introduce and examine the (first) Chinese Renaissance at and after the end of the Qing dynasty as a case in point, before turning to a more contemporary analysis of the ongoing (second) Chinese Renaissance under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping. The discussion of these contexts will reveal and emphasize the politics accompanying the insistence on a “Chinese Renaissance,” which may but need not be connected to the question of empire and empire-building. The focus will be on Chinese terminology, translation, and the question of what is at stake when reversing the gaze through the introduction of the framework of Meta-Renaissance.