



## **20th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF HISTORICAL SCIENCES**

**Sydney Congress — July 3-9, 2005**

**Opening of the International Congress of Historians  
Sydney, July 3, 2005**

### **Sydney, CISH and the Utopia of Universal History**

The 20th International Congress of Historians — which we start today — is a very particular one. From Paris 1900 to Oslo 2000, all nineteen Congresses so far took place either in Europe or North America. Now, in 2005, we convene for the first time in the Southern hemisphere.

We should take this as a sign. On the way towards a truly global community of historians, we are reaching a new stage. Our organisation — the International Committee of Historical Sciences, founded in Europe 80 years ago — is broadening its scope and spreading into regions where it has been traditionally under-represented. Historians from outside Europe and North America increasingly join the networks, debates and common enterprises for which the International Committee stands. As a consequence, our topics, viewpoints and agenda change. They become more global and, in some sense, more universal. This Congress marks an important step on this way, and will help us to get ahead.

Joseph Banks, the botanist in the expedition of Captain James Cook, praised the coast which they had just “discovered”, and which they named “New South Wales”. He spoke of the land and its “most enticing allurements to European adventurers”. This was in the early 1770s. Today, we would use other language to describe the attractions of Sydney and its environment, and not all of us would qualify as “adventurers” — although we came a long way, and many of us had to overcome obstacles: shortages of travel funds e.g., or visa formalities, or jet lags. But we share Joseph Banks’ high esteem for the “enticing allurements” of this place. We look forward to the coming week which we shall spend in this stimulating and hospitable city. Thanks for inviting us — thanks to the City, to the Australian Historical Association, to the University of New South Wales, and particularly to the historians and organisers who have prepared this occasion so well, under the leadership of Martyn Lyons.

In addition to its undisputed charms and qualities as a host city, Sydney offers a special symbolic surplus for this Congress of 2005. Seen from Europe at least, Australia is something like a bridge. Strongly British and Western in many ways, her geography and composition, outlook and neighbours make her open and close to non-Western regions and civilisations. I could not think of a better place for the Congress of the World Organisation of Historians which originated in the West and maintains a Western core, while opening up to other traditions and regions of the world, thus changing itself, becoming more global and, hopefully, more universal.

I speak for the International Committee of Historical Sciences — in French: Comité International des Sciences Historiques or CISH — whose main task is to organise the World Congresses of Historians. The organisation was founded in 1926 with the support



of European, North American, and very few additional national committees of historians. This group of supporters has grown over the decades. Australia became a member in 1964, while Australian historians had been active on International Congresses at least since 1950. Nowadays the organisation consists of historians' associations from 54 countries as well as of 28 thematically specialised international commissions. From a bird eye's view, the history of CISH has moved through three phases:

First, CISH tried to heal some of the wounds left over from World War I, by bringing historians from victorious and defeated countries together, and by fighting nationalism in the study and presentation of history. With very limited success. The organisation virtually collapsed before and during World War II.

The second phase extended from right after World War II up to 1990. These were the decades of the Cold War, when the International Congresses served as one of the very few platforms on which historians from the communist "East" and the non-communist "West" could meet, discuss and negotiate.

In 1990, CISH lost this mission, the Cold War was over. We entered a new period of accelerated globalisation. CISH was moving into its third phase. Now its primary aim was to bring together historians and historical approaches from different continents and regions of the world, from the North and the South. It became the major task of CISH to facilitate and promote what we sometimes call the "globalisation" of history. It is in this context that the Sydney Congress has its particular importance.

Nearly everywhere in the world, the study and presentation of history has always been closely tied to regional, national, specific cultural, sometimes religious frameworks. This is not surprising. After all, people in all civilisations turn to parts of their past in order to relate them to their present situation and their future expectations (in other words, they get interested in history) because they are interested in where they come from and where they go, to whom they belong and from whom they differ. Dealing with one's history has to do with one's collective identity, and this is why the study and presentation of history has always had, nearly everywhere, a particularising thrust. In the 19th and 20th century, national frameworks and loyalties were those which shaped the study and presentation of history most. Sometimes, such loyalties have led to grave distortions in the work of historians. On the other hand, people share a lot beyond national, regional, ethnic and cultural particularities, since they are human. A lot of real history has always taken place in spaces reaching beyond the scope of the single regional, cultural, national or religious units. And, once history was practiced as scholarship, according to scientific principles, the dealing with one's past and relating it to the present became less particularistic — since the principles of scholarship are not nationally or ethnically or religiously specific but claim universal acceptance. Because of all this, the study and presentation of history has also developed a universalising drive.

In this basic tension between history as a particularising endeavour tied to specific collective identities — on the one hand — and history as a universalising potentiality and force — on the other — CISH has mostly been on the side of the latter. The work of CISH has usually tried to emphasize the universalizing aspects of the study of history. I hope this Congress will do the same.

Universalizing, universal history — but what does it mean?



It certainly cannot mean something like a unified world history framed by one encompassing developmental scheme. Attempts of this kind have always failed — why? Because the study and presentation of history is always dependant on the viewpoints practised and the questions asked by those who study and present it. These viewpoints and questions are influenced by individual and collective experiences, expectations and choices. Such experiences and expectations differ by country, class, culture, gender and other criteria, and they clearly change over time. This makes for a high degree of diversity, fluidity and conflict in the study and presentation of history — as long as such diversity, fluidity and conflict are not ruled out or suppressed by political means or ideological force.

Rather, when speaking of universal history I have three characteristics in mind:

1. **common methodological convictions.** Historians with universalizing orientations will, certainly, apply very different methods, viewpoints and theories. But they will share certain convictions as to the spirit in which history should be researched and narrated, e.g. respect for evidence as well as faith in certain principles of communication between them, including debate and criticism as well as the readiness to learn and to revise oneself in case one is faced by new evidence or better arguments. This is the core of what we mean by history as a science – *Geschichte als Wissenschaft*.
2. **a spirit of inclusion.** Clearly, historians differ as to what they find interesting, how they put their stories together, which explanations they offer, and how they make sense of the past. They deeply differ and will continue to do so. But these differences become compatible with universal history to the extent that these different positions are not practised in isolation from one another, but are brought to face one another and to deal with one another, by opposition and cooperation, interpretation and comparison, rejection and recognition. This way coexistence is transformed into interdependence, and as a consequence the single positions change. For practicing universal history in this sense, one needs to ask questions which form bridges across diversity, one needs to have certain skills of communication, and it helps if one mixes curiosity with tolerance. Universal history of this sort can be trained, and International Congresses can be training grounds.
3. **emphasis on context and interconnections.** Clearly, the history of single nations, regions and cultures, of specific processes, experiences and events, the history of specific problems will continue to be the normal objects of historical study. Most of us will continue to be experts in the history of one or a few countries, of specific problem areas and of limited time periods. The standards within our discipline are such that one has to specialize. Usually historians have specific preferences, and are not interested in everything. That's the way it is and, probably, should be. But the orientation towards universal history would mean that one is, nevertheless, interested in broad interconnections and contexts. One can learn to see the single regions, societies, nations and constellations, which one studies in depth, as influenced and framed by their mutual relations and by comprehensive processes. This way, national identities and structures will appear more as results of transnational processes than vice versa. Many of us will continue to concentrate our research on problems within one or two national contexts. But one can frame and interpret them in a different light, if one sees them from a universal perspective, as parts and products of universal interconnections, entanglements.



Common methodological convictions, a spirit of inclusion, the emphasis on context and interconnections — if these are the features which define universal history, why should it be a utopia?

Utopias are desirable, resist full realisation, but have an impact on reality.

No doubt, universal history is something to aim at and to work for. It can provide new perspectives and surprising insights. It can be a source of learning. It can serve as a platform on which one can deal with differences in a rational way instead of ignoring or suppressing them. In an increasingly interconnected but highly diversified world this is an important qualification. Historians can help to produce it.

There can be no doubt that universal history is difficult to do. One needs specific skills, languages among them. One needs a lot of knowledge, one needs to know how to compare and how to study interconnections. One needs to be patient and know one's own limits. Most important perhaps, nearly everywhere the study of history continues, with good reason, to be closely tied to the national and cultural context in which it is pursued. But to some extent one has to unlock oneself from such specific contexts in order to do universal history.

On the other hand, universal history is not an illusion but an utopia. It can have — and does have — a productive impact on our work as historians today, even if only in the sense of a regulatory idea. I am optimistic that this congress will be a case in point: a market place of different ideas, results and approaches, but with some orientation towards universal history.

I hope we will have an interesting week.

Jürgen Kocka  
President (2000-2005)