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Forward: A Kaleidoscope of CEH-C Meanings

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by Peter Becker & Dominique Reill

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Both are co-founders and co-organizers of the Central European History Convention.

In July 2024, on a hot early evening at a beer garden in Vienna, we — Peter Becker and Dominique Reill — discussed how magnificently heterogeneous our field was, how it keeps growing, changing, and challenging. We also discussed that perhaps we shared this estimation because both of us had been fortunate enough over our careers to participate in so many varied venues, all over Europe and the Americas, that brought scholars from all the successor states of the Habsburg Empire together. Separately and together in just that academic year, we had heard emerging scholars present work on all aspects of the Monarchy, with the new trends of global, environmental, post-imperial, and business history taking center stage as never before. Over plates of Austrian delicacies (whose origins were distinctly Balkan and Hungarian), we thought about what a pity it was that more people in our field did not get to enjoy the stimulation of what all this new work promised. For historical reasons, the main venues for meeting people doing research on Central European history have been situated in the US, especially the annual conference sponsored by ASEES (the Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies). Peter Becker had been thinking for a while it might be high time to try to do a kind of ASEES in Europe to provide a space for networking and discussion in the region. Dominique Reill grinned like a Cheshire cat: she'd been thinking the same. Maybe now was the time to try? Maybe together — with European and North American networks conjoined — it could work?

Fast forward twelve months: it worked. It was a herculean effort to bring together, though. A very small group of passionate scholars pushed through something that didn't exist yet. There was strong support for the strategic decisions we took to make this conference special. We organized the program in a way that was excitingly geared towards promoting emerging scholars. Senior scholars were easily convinced to take on commenting and chair roles so as to provide feedback and networking opportunities for their junior peers. To reduce the hurdles for participation, we waived participation fees and set up a funding scheme for travel subsidies. Reduced rates at hotels were also made available to all who registered. The result of these efforts was truly amazing and surprised all members of the organizational team: In July 2025, a staggering conglomeration of over 500 scholars — emerging and senior, European, South American, North American, Middle Eastern, and Asian — filled the hallways of the University of Vienna to share, listen, comment, learn, disagree, and cheer.

During the convention Peter Becker, Dominique Reill, and the ever *einfallsreich* administrative support team headed by Dominik Fellner and Anita Wallner enjoyed watching the participants engage with each other in the panel sessions, but also at the lunch breaks and during the evening program. It was inspiring to behold how intellectually vibrant and socially engaging the conference turned into being. We could not stop wondering how this conference actually worked. The answer to this question could be given only by participants. We therefore turned to the emerging scholars who made up the core of the conference to help us put into words what happened during these July days in Vienna.

We invited about 50 emerging scholars (who had made their desire to collaborate known) to share their personal experience with the conference in the form of a blog entry. We emphasized that writing up something was absolutely voluntary, and should not take priority over summer work or family obligations. In the instructions provided by Dominique Reill, potential contributors were asked to focus on one specific theme, but without giving guidelines of how to approach this theme. The result are 20 blogs, which are refreshingly diverse in their approach to the convention. Some of them use a very personal tone and take the readers on an intellectual and social tour, others remain on the more familiar ground of a review essay and help readers situate the presentations and discussions at the convention within the main debates of our field. After all the blogs had arrived, we mobilized Jonathan Singerton and Jana Osterkamp to support the editing and framing exercise.

Jonathan Singerton, Jana Osterkamp, Peter Becker, and Dominique Reill then met online and decided it was best to frame the blogs with an Forward (which you are reading now) and an Afterword. While this Forward situates the blogs and contextualizes how their multifarious formats and content are a sign of the many different ways emerging scholars experienced the convention and made sense of it, the Afterword pulls the different threads of the blogs together, to help lend sense of them as a whole. To help our readers navigate the blogs, we have defined categories to help organize the order of the blogs on the website, around themes that emphasize their explorative and personal characters. Again, these categories are very loose: Connecting; Repositioning; Reflecting. None of the blogs were written to address these categories; they are just artificial constructs to help a reader overcome the deadening boredom of alphabetical orders. All the blogs intersect and diverge in fascinating, often intensely humane and intimate ways. Simply put: they are a kaleidoscope of giving meanings to the different experiences and reflections of so many brilliant brains interacting for three days at the same place, hovering around the histories of the same broad region.

Blogs are awkward beasts for historians; unlike other genres they are a medium most of us do not use to share our ideas. But in reading over this eclectic collection of responses, they feel deeply important for precisely the reason why the Convention was put together in the first place: they release the Convention and its field of study from being defined by what a relatively isolated group of individuals envisioned. These blogs create an easily-detectable cyber-trail of the consequences, reflections, and worries of the Convention participants themselves, most of whom are at the beginning of their careers and most of whom have yet had the opportunities to put conferences and conventions together along their own interests. No convention organizers could (or should) ever presume to know what will come out of bringing people together. These blogs attest to the wealth of listening beyond what convention programs say an event is.

We hope readers of these blogs reflect upon them in this way: in-person exchange between a wide array of researchers, students, and teachers will always result in more than expected. And the only way we can learn this is by continuing to listen and reflect together. We can never thank enough Dominik Fellner and Anita Wallner for all the work they did behind the scenes before, during, and after the convention to make it actually happen. We thank all the blog participants for giving up some of their summer time to share their thoughts in such thought-provoking ways. And we thank Jana Osterkamp and Jonathan Singerton for giving up their September weeks to line edit, organize, and provide an Afterword to help bring all these voices together again into another version of reflection on "Ubi fuimus" and "Quo vadis."



Peter Becker & Dominique Reill © MATERIALMATTERS / Robert Vanis

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