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Editorial

This journal is dedicated to applied history. It offers a platform for historians to bring the results of their historical research to bear on the present, on the issues that (should) concern us today. It seeks to promote *historical* thinking as an essential element of discussions about the challenges that our societies are now confronted with. Historical thinking involves first and foremost a keen eye for context in the broadest sense: an awareness of the social, economic, cultural, political, demographic, and environmental conditions within which the historical process unfurls, in the past and in the present. Contextualization allows us to improve our understanding of why people make certain decisions and how they come to such resolutions, of how key ideas are shaped, expressed, and contested, and of why events and developments unfold the way they do. Context also prompts us to move beyond easy, rhetorically appealing, but often lazy analogies between past and present that obscure the complexity and idiosyncrasy of discrete events. By acknowledging the similarities *and* differences between seemingly analogous events, we can achieve a better understanding of the situations before us today. We find, precisely here, an indispensable benefit of a historical approach: it conditions us to recognize complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty, as opposed to embarking on a quest for closure, reductionism, and finality. If we want to mine the past as a reservoir of “good” and “bad” practices from which to draw inspiration, such a critical historical approach is needed. Furthermore, historical thinking is necessary if we are to get to the root of the issues, concerns, crises, and narratives that are shaping contemporary society, as well as to develop informed speculations about what may lie ahead. Finally, historical thinking, particularly in the form of comparisons between past and present, can help interrogate those key assumptions that might seem self-evident today and to illuminate the striking features, struggles, and challenges facing our contemporary societies.

This means that for this new journal we have cast a wide net: we encourage contributions from specialists in all branches of the humanities and social sciences who adopt historical approaches. The array of contributors will range from historians and anthropologists to political scientists and sociologists, from experts in the history of antiquity to those working on the very recent past: thus various time frames and a full gamut of approaches and methodologies will be brought together.

Our first issue reflects our commitment to this broad range of approaches and themes that together give shape to the field of applied history. The opening contribution by the Harvard University scholars Aroop Mukharji and Richard Zeckhauser—“Bound to Happen. Explanation Bias in Historical Analysis”, available in open access—offers a philosophical reflection on how we approach the past from the perspective of hindsight and warns about the underestimation of uncertainty and coincidence in historical studies. Our current future may appear uncertain, but so were our past futures. Their article offers a way out of the trap of explanation bias: namely, via a deepening of historical knowledge of the subject at hand, which increases awareness of conflicting evidence; the adoption of a contrarian mindset; the incorporation in historical research of insights from the field of decision science; and, lastly, the use of historical simulations. The second article, written by Christopher L. Colvin and Paul Winfree, aims to take the cause of applied history further by drawing lessons from applied economics: the application of economic theory and history in policymaking. Colvin and Winfree describe the “ideal applied historian” as someone who knows how to communicate complex insights to non-experts without dumbing things down, who is not afraid to think along lines of applicability instead of focusing only on “pure” historical knowledge, and who keeps an eye open to historical context and contingency. The third article, by the Australian historian David Lowe, reflects on the current status of applied history. Lowe sees a great window of opportunity for applied history today: an earlier focus on “statesmanship” has been replaced by a much broader intervention within the sphere of public policy; emergent institutions across the globe are now dedicated to promoting the mission of applied history.

Three further articles each discuss a specific historical case study and bring their results to bear on the present. Sven Wilson et al. present a historical investigation of the medical records of black and white veterans of the American Civil War. These veterans underwent medical examinations to determine their eligibility for pensions, which could be denied if sexually transmitted infections (STIs) were detected. The authors show that black veterans were denied pensions on a ratio of 2:1 compared with white veterans although wartime medical records indicate that the prevalence of STIs among both groups was almost identical. Based on their historical enquiry, the authors ask for awareness of the presence, then and now, of risks and effects of racial bias in the health-care system. The demographer Stuart Gietel-Basten intervenes in the debate about the medicalization of childbearing by presenting a unique historical case study of birth times. His analysis of the baptism registers of two nineteenth century Russian villages indicates that “natural” human births—that is, births that occurred without any form of (medical) intervention—disproportionately

took place between midnight and early morning, whereas nowadays, given the thoroughgoing medicalization of childbirth, daytime deliveries predominate. This “glimpse of the past”, Gietel-Basten argues, invites us to reflect on “who we are today” and helps us to question and contextualize what we tend to perceive as “natural” and “normal”. Finally, Philip Chilton presents his research on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anarchists to enhance our understanding of the motives of present-day terrorists. The anarchist case, Chilton argues, shows that terrorists aimed to do more than simply cause terror. Terrorism was and is also, in part, an act of “propaganda by the deed”, an insight that invites us to delve deeper into the material conditions that give rise to these acts.

Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum