

CALL FOR PAPERS

Annual Conference of the Historians in the German Association of American Studies

Heroism and the Heroic in American History

February 9-11, 2018

Akademie für Politische Bildung Tutzing

This conference, which is organized by Michael Butter (University of Tübingen) and Simon Wendt (University of Frankfurt), aims to critically reconsider the history of heroism in the United States from the American Revolution to the present.

Heroes do not simply exist; they are created through practices of representation, and especially narration. Without a story, there is no hero. Nevertheless, the effects of heroism are real and palpable. As a social and cultural construct, it serves important functions in human societies. Heroes and heroines embody the norms, values, and beliefs of social groups—making them key components in the formation of collective identities—and serve as role models whose behavior people seek to emulate. As symbols of dominant norms and identities, they become sources of authority and are frequently used to legitimize social, cultural, and racial hierarchies. Heroism thus tends to be a stabilizing force in society, but it is constantly debated, reevaluated, and revised. Consequently, it is also historically contingent. The significance attributed to heroism and the qualities that people deem heroic change according to time and place. Similarly important, the heroic is related to, but also needs to be differentiated from other forms of perceived exceptionalism—including celebrity, sainthood, and the divine. Finally, heroism presupposes notions of the un-heroic or non-heroic for its exceptionalism to be recognized.

While U.S. historians have devoted thousands of pages to heroism, only few studies do justice to the topic's complexities. Too often, scholars still imply that heroism is “real,” ignoring the fact that heroes are the product of intricate heroization processes that elevate real or imagined people to heroic status through reoccurring iterations about what is believed to be heroic at a certain point in time. Since this communication process is primarily a media discourse, studying heroism requires a thorough analysis of heroic narratives and representations of heroism in various forms of media. However, historians also need to take into account the multitude of actors that are involved in this process, as well as their motivations to construct some people as heroic while ignoring others.

The conference organizers invite proposals that focus on the ways in which heroism has been constructed and that examine its social, cultural, and political functions in U.S. history. Specifically, we are interested in papers that critically reexamine the historiography of American heroism and shed fresh light on how, in which contexts, and for which groups processes of heroization legitimized or delegitimized social, cultural, and political norms and values; how they created, affirmed, or challenged social hierarchies and collective identities; and on how they differed from or were similar to other forms of perceived extraordinariness.

Topics may include, but are certainly not limited to:

- *Heroism and Race* (e.g. African American heroism versus white heroism; the memory of heroes of color in black communities)
- *Heroism and Gender* (e.g. female heroism in the U.S. military, superheroines, heroism and changing notions of masculinity)
- *Heroism and Class* (e.g. American class conflict and the democratization of heroism; heroic workers in the labor movement)
- *Heroism and War* (e.g. changing notions of martial heroism in the “post-heroic” era)
- *Heroism and Politics* (e.g. changing interpretations of heroic leadership and the political uses of heroism)
- *Heroism and the Nation* (e.g. the uses of heroism in governmental and non-governmental efforts to strengthen citizens’ national loyalty)
- *Heroism and Celebrity* (e.g. intellectuals’ critique of celebrity and their lamentations over the “end of American heroism”)
- *Heroism and Religion* (e.g. similarities and differences between notions of the heroic, the saintly, and the divine)
- *Heroism and the Un-Heroic* (e.g. heroic attributes and their supposed opposites; “heroic” criminals and society)

Please send a short CV and a 500-word proposal that provides information on the paper’s content, methodology, and historiographical contribution to the conference organizers Michael Butter (michael.butter@uni-tuebingen.de) and Simon Wendt (wendt@em.uni-frankfurt.de) by June 1, 2017.