

**Call for Papers:
Illusion, Fake, and Fraud in American History**

Annual Conference of the Historians in the German Association for American Studies (GAAS)
Akademie für Politische Bildung, Tutzing (<https://www.apb-tutzing.de>)
May 9-11, 2025

In 1782, Benjamin Franklin printed a counterfeit supplement to the *Boston Independent Chronicle*. Aimed at spreading bogus information about the British instigating indigenous peoples' violence, its fake articles were widely reprinted in London. While this might be one of the first (and successful) examples of fake news, all sorts of tricks and hoaxes, humbug, swindles, scams, and fraudulent schemes have shaped Americans' experiences; impostors, con artists, and hustlers have populated U.S. history from early on. From Franklin's ploy to today's seeming omnipresence of fake news, from indigenous treaties to George W. Bush's claim about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, from P. T. Barnum's shows to the Bernie Madoff scheme: American history abounds with deceit, in the economic and political field, but also culturally and socially.

Along with these historical practices of deception, narratives about deception have unfolded since the emergence of the confidence man as literary figure in the early 19th century to Netflix' 2022 *Inventing Anna*. They at times praised scammers as astute entrepreneurs, fulfilling that iconic American promise that the ordinary could rise to greatness. Faking it could also have an empowering effect, opening up fields for self-fashioning, disrupting given norms, and diluting arbitrary social or racial boundaries. Other narratives, however, sought to contain illusion and its potential for fraud, expressing the fear of being duped, and urging for the exposure of deceit. Both narratives emerged in the context of the rising world of capitalism, a new public entertainment culture, a democratizing political field, an allegedly more fluid social structure, as well as rigid ethnic and racial boundaries.

For historians, tracing illusion and its variations is promising as it has been entangled with larger questions of social norms and values, of belonging and power relations. We suggest to discern three levels of analysis: For one, looking into fraudulent schemes and their effects, their actors and victims, intent and implementation can tell us more about existing legal norms and social structures, the economic constraints and cultural practices at a certain point of time, but also about people's dreams, ambitions, and successes in transcending boundaries. On a second level, analyzing what was described as fake and fraud at a given time reveals the normative power of defining deceit. Where were boundaries drawn between entrepreneurial spirit and humbug, between self-fashioning and deception, political persuasiveness and deceit? What were the meanings assigned to deception and its counterparts throughout American history? Finally, while philosophers and economists, sociologists and political scientists have attempted to conceptualize deception and fraud, could we as historians contribute to the field and tackle conceptual differences between the terms, and, foremost, think about how to use them as analytical tool in historiography?

For the 2025 annual meeting of the GAAS historians, we invite papers that critically investigate deception, fraud, fake, and illusion in U.S. history. We would also like to invite contributions from various disciplines and fields such as political science, sociology, literary and cultural studies, art history, and anthropology to open up an interdisciplinary dialogue about the topic.

Topics may include but are not limited to:

- The figure of the trickster, con man, impostor
- Illusion, show, visual deception, and entertainment before and after Barnum

- Hustling and the ideal of self-making
- Empowerment by deceit (racial, ethnic, gender)
- Financial and business fraud and scams; white collar crimes
- Fears of scams, anti-fraud regulations
- War propaganda
- Election fraud
- Politics of fake news
- Diplomacy and duplicity
- Representations of illusion, fake, and fraud in the arts

We also invite doctoral students to submit an abstract for participating in the Young Scholars' Forum where they can discuss (aspects of) their dissertation projects independently from the conference topic.

Please submit your paper proposal of up to 300 words and a short bio (one page) as one PDF file to the conference organizers Nadine Klopfer and Philipp Gassert by November 15, 2024: nadine.klopfer@lmu.de, gassert@uni-mannheim.de
You will be notified in December, 2024.