

Concluding remarks

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It is an honour to have been asked to make a few remarks at the end of the South African Historical Association Conference “Heritage Creation and Research: The Restructuring of Historical Studies in South Africa”, organised by Grietjie Verhoef and her team at RAU. Conferences themselves are part of the academic and social heritage and they have identifiable components without which the tradition would be incomplete.

First, there is an infrastructure for any conference – making delegates’ travel arrangements, finding a venue, coping with files and photocopied papers, catering, wheedling sponsorship and well wishers (like the generous Royal Dutch Embassy and the Gauteng Provincial Legislature), arranging field trips (like the tour of Johannesburg). I would like to thank all the people involved in these important practicalities -- and I am sure that I speak on behalf of all of us – for upholding the best of conference heritage. We are very grateful to all involved for providing this infrastructure so competently and graciously.

Secondly, for a good conference in the best of traditions, there needs to be a particular component of papers and presenters. On this occasion, we have enjoyed an appropriate mix of subjects, excellent presentations and wide-ranging yet always relevant themes. A wonderful camaraderie has been created here of exchanging ideas, renewing acquaintances and friendships and making new ones. The personal interchange and the time to appreciate personalities and individual academic identities is a vital component of the conference heritage and it has certainly been present here. There is just no better alternative to face-to-face meetings like this.

The third part of the conference heritage involves the outcome – an intellectual outcome. Some conferences are successful because the subject is constrained and the focus tight. Others generate thought that flows more freely and engenders or encourages creativity. This conference, however, falls into another category – and one which the organisers were clever to

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identify as appropriate to the moment – a self-reflexive meeting, a kind of historical studies “psycho-analysis” if you like, a search for fresh identity. As Andre Odendaal pleaded with us in his keynote address, those professional disciplines whose object of study is the past need to look deeply into their souls, psyches and educational and research agendas, and take stock are where they are, and also consider where they wish to go.

What has been significant about our proceedings has been that – unusually – those involved in historical studies have been made to think about the future while we probably feel far more comfortable about the past. Self-reflection and critique is crucial. It enables us to identify key challenges and opportunities and to think about them carefully. The papers we have heard have been replete with both challenges and opportunities. This is not, of course, the first time that historians have encountered challenges. Ours is an unusual discipline in this regard. At the risk of over-simplifying, my own view is that this conference highlights what has been an ongoing challenge and debate ever since history – like other academic disciplines -- emerged about 150 years ago.

The big question is: Where does history fit into the interdisciplinary mix? What best role can it play in society? Some of the challenges of the post second world war world were met by the division of academic history into sub-disciplines – social history, economic history, environmental history and the like. The challenge from other theoretically based, professional, intellectual social (but also natural) sciences was met by broadening “history” into “historical studies”, an umbrella, even colonizing -- but at the same time non-hegemonic – term, encompassing the widest variety of individual interests from palaeontology to modern oral memory.

We have now moved beyond this phase. While the challenges from other intellectuals were accommodated in the manner described, historical studies has a new opportunity, another audience, client and partner – the public and the more practical applied areas of study. Another interactive process has opened up and we have grappled creatively with it during this conference. The practical challenges come from museology, advertising copywriting (e.g. how much text on two boards?) carpentry, architecture, engineering, conservation techniques, land and property management, public relations, business, accounting and consulting procedures, the tourism and regional development sectors, antiquarianism, competition for funding, digitization and technology.

I think that the challenge is no longer the debate over the philosophy or theory of knowledge as it once was, but the transformation of that knowledge into public information -- the conversion of knowledge production into information production. We are coming to grips with an international

information revolution. Access to that information by the widest of possible audiences is the priority. We are not just intellectuals, but engaged public intellectuals, a group well established in other parts of the world. I am most familiar with Australia.

This very successful conference has been about debating a universe and paradigm of partnership, blurring boundaries and adopting integration and inclusivity. It has been a call to abandon turf and to assume a new freedom which will allow us to collaborate with whoever and whatever, to create the best and most accurate information, based on the best and most accurate knowledge. It is a huge task and an exciting future, but one which I think we are better empowered to engage with after the stimulating three days of this conference.