

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR AKEX LICHTENSTEIN – INTERIM EDITOR “AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW”

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Categories: [Numero 41 - Giugno 2016](#), [Numero 41 - Percorsi](#), [Numero 41 - Rubriche](#), [Percorsi](#)



The *American Historical Review* (AHR), founded in 1895, remains to this day the official scholarly journal of the American Historical Association, the largest historians' professional association in the United States. Despite its name, by no means does the AHR focus on "American" history. Indeed, as the Association's journal of record, the AHR strives to publish material from all areas of historical scholarship, without regard to geographic field, period of study, or methodology, privileging none. Submissions are judged on their potential to be of interest to a wide array of historical scholars as well as their contributions to their specific fields or areas of concern. In judging manuscripts, the editorial staff looks for original research, depth of knowledge, and breadth of implications.

Reflecting the journal's wide range, the editorial staff is quite large and diverse, and turns over frequently. The journal is directed by an Editor who usually serves two 5-year terms and is hired as a senior professor by Indiana University (IU), where the journal is based. He or she is then joined by an Associated Editor, drawn from the ranks of the IU history department faculty, who serves for two years. Before sending submissions to referees, the Editor and Associate Editor consult closely with at least two members of a 13-person Board of Editors, who represent many areas of expertise and methodology. These members of the Board serve staggered three year terms. The Editor, Associate Editor, and Board of Editors are all appointed by the Research Division of the American Historical Association, which ultimately oversees the publication. These many layers of editorial accountability and constant turnover insure that the journal stays fresh in its approach, remains open to diverse currents of scholarship, and never serves as the province of one particular area of scholarship or school of thought. This admirable flexibility, openness, and diversity of editorial input reflect the journal's mission to serve the entire historical profession without prejudice. This diversity appears as well in the over 900 book review we publish annually, across every conceivable field of history, and in various roundtables, and conversations that take up broad questions of methodology, practice, and concern to historians.

It is fair to say that such openness was not always the case. The most important developments in the journal's evolution over the course of 120 years have mirrored changes in the American historical profession at large. The AHA, and the profession it represents, certainly began as an elitist project, designed to shore up guild pretensions, professional criteria, and gatekeeping functions that would protect the status of university professors as members of the establishment. At the time, this exclusive club remained almost entirely white, male, native-born in the U.S., and protestant in religion. The content of the journal reflected this narrow professional orientation, and focused primarily on the doings of elite statesmen in Europe and the U.S., the building of institutions, and high politics. Social history, as we know it today, remained a rarity, as did any attention (except in the most condescending fashion), to the agency or experience of non-Europeans, women, people of color, the working class, or the rest of the majority of humanity. A rather narrow band of editorial background and expertise served to keep the journal's scholarship within such confined boundaries for many decades. As a result, for many years methodological innovation, openness to

interdisciplinary currents of thought, or self-critical reflection on the nature and practice of history only infrequently disturbed the placid surface of a staid and traditional publication. It is true that the 1920s and 1930s saw some breakthroughs from the more critical views associated with the “Progressive” school of historians, but it was not until the historiographic revolutions of the 1960s and their aftermath that the *AHR* really became transformed, as did the profession at large.

Over the last several decades, however, as the historical profession itself has democratized, the journal too has opened its pages to a much richer historiography—although it must be said, too often as a follower rather than a leader. For example, the journal did not publish a single article by an African-American scholar between 1910 and 1980. Nevertheless, if we consider the gradual “evolution” of the journal and its editorial practices, the most significant development has indeed been its ability to encompass the full diversity and range of the human—and indeed, non-human—past. Today, I think one can say that if one is looking for cutting-edge developments and innovations in historical scholarship—from the “animal turn”, to new approaches to military history, to digital methodologies of research and presentation, to environmental history, to “big” history—the *AHR* is the place to turn. A diverse, wide-ranging, more representative, and ever-changing Board of Editors helps make such innovation possible.

All that said, the journal certainly can still do more to incorporate a wider range of historical scholarship. We make an effort to publish scholarship produced by historians working around the world, not just in the U.S. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that most of the articles in the pages of the *AHR* come from Anglophone universities and research institutes; as a result, a great deal of important scholarship being produced in other languages, or in the “global south” may pass us by. A more cosmopolitan approach would enrich the journal. Our very comprehensive book review section continues to serve as an extraordinarily useful resource for our professional colleagues. Nevertheless, we find it challenging to review books published by smaller presses or by those not based in the United States: the *AHR* can only review books that publishers or authors send to us or otherwise make us aware of. Moreover, as ever more scholarship finds outlets beyond the covers of hard-bound books—digital publication, websites, films, oral histories, museums, public sites, and so on—the *AHR* will have to widen its compass of the genres it choose to review.

Methodologically, the journal remains extremely open to new ways of *practicing* history, but has so far been less adept at finding new ways of *presenting* historical scholarship. Like all scholarly publications, the *AHR* faces dilemmas driven by the “digital revolution.” How “open” (in terms of reader access) should our publication be, and what are the fiscal and scholarly implications of such potential openness? Is our rather old-fashioned approach to peer review—all submissions are sent to two Editorial Board members, followed by three experts in the field—out of step with growing calls for a web-based, crowd-sourced review processes? While replicated on the web, does our traditional format—a hard-bound “journal” that appears five-times a year—make the *AHR* less nimble than it should be? Might we, for example, publish book reviews on a rolling basis, much as H-Net does?

Should we dispense with the “journal” as a format altogether, and “post” articles as they are completed? Or would such changes amount to self-liquidation of the journal and its mission?

In fact, while serving as Associate Editor (2014-15) and then as Interim Editor (2015-16) I have concluded that in many ways the *AHR*'s more traditional *form* as a historical journal—if not necessarily its exact content—is well worth preserving and defending. Yet as an Interim Editor whose term comes to a close in August 2016 I will not have to answer these pressing questions or meet these challenges. My successors at the *AHR*, the editorial team they assemble, and the research Division of the American Historical Association will have a chance to chart a new future in historical scholarship in difficult times. The *AHR* has adapted to changing historical circumstances in the past; I am confident it will again.

