

### Reflections on Legacies, Failures, and Successes

My second term as president of the European Society for Environmental History is ending at the Bern conference. It has been a privilege and honour to lead our Society in these last four years. As our constitution demands, I will deliver my report in Bern to the general assembly for approval. Nonetheless, I would like to share with you some thoughts on my experience.

I think that no one would object if I say that these past four years have been extremely challenging not just for the ESEH but for the world we live in. Against a background of proliferating unnatural disasters, first the pandemic, then the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the consequent war have tragically marked our times. In the face of the devastating loss of human lives and the even more horrific reality of the war I feel it is absolutely inappropriate to speak of the problems the ESEH has had to address. I can only hope that the society was able to show support, solidarity and humanity in the midst of such ferocious times. I can testify that it did for me; the ESEH was there when the pandemic hit my family and me harshly. If I were to deeply contemplate these four years, my vision would be that the ESEH was there as a caring community, gardening peace and solidarity against all the odds.

Nonetheless, I should confess I am quite allergic to self-assessment. This is not because I do not feel the obligation to report back to those who have trusted me. Rather, I am afraid that in these times of neoliberal academia, the risk might be to transform any kind of report into the usual bragging about our individual successes, forgetting that they are never individual. Furthermore, I believe that it is not easy to talk about success without talking of our failures. Personally, I have a great respect for failures; as we know, they are part of the very production of scientific knowledge (the trial and error process). But, even more than that, they are an important part of our lives. I argue that we should question the very idea of success and failure, challenging the norms that decide what makes something one or the other. Plus, I believe it is liberating to speak also of the so-called failures. A few years ago I got a quite large grant and everyone was congratulating me for my success but I felt the need to confess that that year I had submitted 12 grant applications. Then, was I still a successful scholar? What does it mean to be a successful scholar? I am proud that some of my former Ph.D. students organised an experimental session in Tallinn on failures in academia. I am always happy when we fight back against a system that tries to make us competitors in a never-ending self-promotion carnival. This openness to speaking of failures, even better, to challenging the idea of

success while nurturing humility and collective work, I hope might be part of the legacy of these four years we have worked together.

When I became president of the ESEH I wanted to increase participation in the life of the Society. I had the impression that many of the activities were occurring within the board, leaving quite limited space for the involvement of other members. This was one of the reasons why there was a proliferation of committees during my leadership. Speaking of failures and successes, it is clear that not all the committees have worked in the same way and with the same intensity. In some cases, the task was difficult – I am thinking, for instance, of the committee on the history of the society; in other cases, we hit some technical issues that were not easy to overcome – this occurred with our podcast and the Atlas. Nonetheless, I am extremely grateful to all our members who engaged with our projects and made our Society a space for experimentation and knowledge production. A success, indeed, if you agree with me that success lies in the process of working together, experimenting and hopefully having fun. I guess that the main legacy I would like to see from this effort is not so much some specific outputs but the idea of mobilising our community beyond the institutional tasks we are committed to delivering. Actually, I would like to take responsibility for a failure which hopefully could bring new and more exciting failures – pardon me, I meant successes. Mine has still been a quite top-down approach; I decided to coagulate common efforts on themes I wanted to place at the core of our agenda. Probably, a better approach could have been to launch a call for new committees – even changing this label to something less institutional such as labs or tables – so they could have emerged from the actual interests of our constituency. Sometimes a mistake could also be a fantastic legacy.

Since this last Notepad has been assuming the taste of a quite confidential confession, let me end by handing you the two things that are especially dear to me. The creation of the diversity committee and the installation of the new Bristol-Bern Prize (2Bs Prize) in Public Environmental History are two small efforts that I hope can be a legacy the ESEH will nurture. And I say ‘nurture’ because I do believe that a good seed does not reproduce the same, identical fruit. Nurturing does not mean continuing what has been already done but caring for a collective work that hopefully will give new, unexpected and much-needed fruits.

The times we have lived in are, undoubtedly, ferocious, but there are also several signs of hope. We have seen the raising of a new global and plural movement for climate justice. In many of our universities students have started mobilising around climate change. The streets of many of our cities have been crossed by the marches of youth asking to change the system, not the climate. In my new university, here in Barcelona, the students have mobilised to obtain a mandatory course on the climate crisis for all the students enrolled in the university. And they included my name among the teachers who could help

## SOCIETY PAGES

design such a course. Black Lives Matter has placed the issue of structural racism at the center of the public discourse, although more in the US than in Europe. Movements such as Decolonize This Place have challenged our neutral and majoritarian understanding of public memories. Ni una menos has given new life to the feminist movement at the intersection of diverse forms of oppression.

The ESEH is, of course, a scholarly society promoting our field of study. It is, and should remain, an open arena for debating diverse opinions with respect and an attitude for learning from each other rather than fighting with each other to impose a specific point of view. But this does not make us, I believe, an apolitical society, where apolitical would mean a community uninterested in what happens out there. No matter what we say, our work will be political anyway, so better to be conscious about it and find the best ways to be socially engaged in the most humble and respectful way possible.

I am not sure whether this is a legacy or rather a project. Perhaps, the truth is that every legacy is always a project and vice versa.

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