

The Last Word: Let's Talk About Class

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In discussions about diversity within SHAFR and in the historical profession at large, we rarely mention financial issues. Of the three classic categories of historical analysis—gender, race, and class—the third has received the least amount of attention. While women in SHAFR have made progress in recent years, and while the presence of non-white scholars has been slowly—if too slowly—increasing, discussions about class remain taboo, perhaps the last vestige of a traditional etiquette that deems it rude to talk about money.

Examples of such reticence are everywhere. We read and peer-review each other's articles and books, but we seldom dare to speak openly about the debts we have accrued. We don't discuss the struggle of being or having a trailing spouse, often at a reduced income; or the improbable arrangements we have in place to balance work and caring responsibilities both for children and parents, often at the same time and on a shoestring; or the fact that even if we have what might be seen as a good job, we still struggle and thus wish to share accommodation at the Arlington Renaissance or to take the dorm room at Tulane because we can really use the extra money. Crucially, we don't dare to allude to the scores of colleagues or friends who have left academia because they could not afford to remain in it. Indeed, we seldom talk about those economic factors that either prevent us from thriving in our profession or that enable us to excel in it, for instance by hiring research assistants, editors, and/or other forms of help by using private funds.

Meanwhile, with few exceptions, on both sides of the ocean and in all types of institutions and contracts, academia is in crisis. To be sure, some issues are intersectional. For instance, women are disproportionately the ones to pay the price. Leaving pay-gap issues aside, academia is still designed around people of means with partners willing to follow them, and most of these people are men. But there are people of all genders who make tremendous financial and personal sacrifices for their career, yet we seldom dare to talk about them. For this group, academic life means pinching pennies, and losing a job after a costly education equates to financial ruin. Their CVs omit what each line meant from a financial and a personal point of view; critically, they do not list the items that are missing simply because they could not afford to make them happen.

Organizations like ours do not have either the mission or the power to eliminate this disparity. Still, SHAFR can do much to mitigate its effects in order to sustain historians of American foreign relations from all classes. In fact, it has already taken some important steps by establishing a fee structure that takes income into account, by offering graduate students the option of working to offset registration expenses, and by creating a position on the SHAFR Council for teaching-only fellows who are often—

though not always—paid less. At recent meetings, it has also provided catered spreads that enabled participants to avoid costly restaurant meals if they wished.

But SHAFR can choose to do even more. It can make providing affordable accommodation at all of its annual meetings a priority. It can divert income streams currently devoted to expensive AV setups and instead offer additional travel grants to scholars at all stages of their careers who might not otherwise be able to attend, or it can fundraise specifically to increase their chances of attending. It can also consider supporting other activities needed to make scholarship happen. For example, SHAFR could lobby major archival repositories to negotiate lower prices for nearby accommodations to make research stays less costly, particularly for users who pay for them out of their own pockets.

During this time of unprecedented cuts to the humanities and to history departments in particular, SHAFR can work with other organizations to discuss the impact that these cuts are having on the demographics of our discipline. To be sure, there are important distinctions to be made among various states and countries, and what kind of research or teaching contract people have makes a tremendous difference. Does healthcare depend on that contract, or not? Can employees be members of a union? Is maternity leave available? Is there free childcare?

Upon deeper reflection, though, I believe these differences can sometimes be exaggerated and end up fragmenting a profession that should instead be united in fighting for its integrity, protection, and diversity, not only in terms of race and gender but also in terms of class. The bottom line is that everywhere, people without independent financial means are most likely to abandon the profession, leaving the historical discipline poorer as a result.

Decades of scholarship have shown how people of all classes have both affected—and been affected by—foreign relations. SHAFR can work with other organisations to ensure all its members' voices are represented. A first step might be to create a taskforce to connect professional organisations across borders to discuss what can be done. Sharing American experiences of activism with the lobbying work of British associations such as the Royal Historical Society or the British Academy, for instance, might benefit colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic.

At the very least, a strong public effort would convey to historians of all classes the message that they matter. People of other underrepresented groups would most likely profit as well. Fully developed and sustained, such an initiative would allow academia and the historical discipline to make a case for their own existence and serve most effectively their purpose of engaging with democratic societies for the benefit of all.