

Global History – The History of Globalisation?

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Like many academic fields of research, the study of history is – not exclusively, but substantially – driven by trends. There is of course no obligation for any historian to follow them. It remains up to us what we study and how we study it, but there is no point denying that some analytical approaches are much more influential and talked about than others and that there is some regularity discernible in the rise and fall of these fashions. Indicators of recent trends in historiography are the titles of new books and journals, the topics discussed at historical conferences, the creation of networks and the job market in academia. During the last decade, one important discipline on the rise has been global history. Its success and influence is perhaps best epitomized in the recent launch of a promising new book series on Global and International History by Cambridge University Press, edited by Harvard Professor Erez Manela and Georgetown Professors John McNeill and Aviel Roshwald. The trend towards analyzing history within a global framework has not been limited to the English-speaking world. The interest in global or, as some call it, world history, has also increased in Europe and some parts of Asia, namely China and Japan. There is no doubt about it: global history is en vogue.

This development presents us historians with tremendous opportunities, but also with rather daunting challenges. One of the main advantages of the global history approach is that it can have a significantly liberating effect. The analysis of the past from a global perspective helps us to transcend boundaries, and not just geographical ones. It allows us to study history without being limited by previously established frameworks of analysis, like nation-states, areas, continents or even civilizations. The aim of global history is not to deny the relevance of these frameworks for many historical developments, but to add a new and un-biased perspective. The increased interest in non-European and non-Western history can lead to the discovery of new dynamics and free us from the distorted view of the world that results from an analysis focused on the constructed dualism of centre and periphery. Global history can also help to build bridges between different historical specializations that have often been at odds with each other. Pioneers of the field like Anthony G. Hopkins and Jürgen Osterhammel have shown the merit that lies in an integrated approach, combining the study of economic

and political history with the examination of cultural, social, intellectual and environmental developments. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that global history can be an opportunity for historians to get out of our self-inflicted incarceration in narrow specializations and look at the world with new eyes.

To ensure the long-term success of global history as an academic discipline, its students and scholars need to address a number of methodological challenges. One central problem every global historian has to face is the balancing act of studying very broad issues whilst maintaining the highest possible standards of academic research. The discussion of big questions, fascinating as they may be, can entail a danger of generalization or even inaccuracy. A possible way to meet this danger is the use of a rigorously-defined set of terms. The broader a subject is, the more important it is to make the meaning of one's terms and concepts absolutely clear. There remains a lot to be done for global historians in this respect. The boundaries between global, world, international, universal and transnational history are not always clear-cut. Another challenge for global historians is the careful selection and combination of primary and secondary sources. In many cases, primary material can only take a minor role in the analysis. Even if the historian had access to all the archives that are relevant to his topic and unlimited financial resources at his disposal – two very unlikely assumptions – the sheer volume of the source material would probably overwhelm him. This need not be a problem. The aim of global history is not the accumulation of encyclopaedic knowledge, and it is not the job of the global historian to know and explain everything that happened everywhere during a certain period of time. However, the fact remains that global historians are compelled to rely to a very significant degree on the expertise of their colleagues within narrower fields of research. This is another reason why global history can only be one out of many successful analytical approaches to the study of the past and not replace all the others.

One important issue of global history is to discuss the origins and the development of globalisation. Until very recently, this was a topic that was monopolized by economists and political scientists. Probably due to the increased relevance that globalisation seems to have on all our lives, historians have become increasingly interested in it during the last few years. Their research has shown that globalisation – understood as the growing formation of connections between people, ideas and markets – is not a recent phenomenon, but can be traced back at least to the beginning of the 16th century. However, this does not mean that globalization has been a linear or teleological macro-process that started at some point in the past and brought us into the present globalized world on a one-way street. The distinction between global history and the history of globalisation is a very important one. The latter is only one aspect of the former. Historians of globalisation should remind themselves of the influence that our perception of the present can have on the way we approach the study of the past. It is perfectly legitimate to look at the historical origins of our present situation, but we must resist the temptation of reading it into the past. We should not forget that the present is nothing but a fleeting moment. When we start thinking and talking about it, it has already gone.

Further reading:

- Sebastian Conrad, Andreas Eckert and Ulrike Freitag (eds.), *Globalgeschichte. Theorien, Ansätze, Themen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2007.
- Anthony G. Hopkins (ed.), *Global History. Interactions between the Universal and the Local*, Basingstoke/ New York 2006.
- Anthony G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalisation in World History*, London 2002.

- Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalisation: A Short History*, Princeton 2005.
- Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2009. (An English translation will be forthcoming from Princeton University Press in 2012.)

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