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in a Connected World

Dominic Sachsenmaier

Excerpt

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Introduction: Neglected diversities

Landscapes of a field

In recent years, most branches of historiography have witnessed a sharp increase in research operating with border-crossing perspectives. Hitherto unusual spatial concepts, be they transnational, transregional, or transcontinental in nature, have become more clearly visible in very different subfields of historiography, ranging from the complex landscapes of “cultural history” to the equally multifaceted environments of “economic history.” Certainly, not all these border-crossing perspectives are “new” in the sense that they were completely unthought-of a generation or more ago. But there has been a decisive change: what were once a few isolated trickles flowing through the landscapes of historiography have now grown into ever more visible currents. Microscopic and macroscopic research interests, which before played only a marginal role in historical scholarship, have now moved closer to the field’s centers of attention.

Like many intellectual developments, the growing significance of transnational and global historical approaches did not amount to a radical conceptual break with earlier approaches. As the following chapters will show, it was in incremental steps that research of this kind started becoming further established through the emergence of new research programs, professorships, associations, book series, and conferences dedicated to related themes. From such bases, it has further influenced many areas of research within the study of history, albeit with neither the ambition nor the possibility of monopolizing them. Since the growing presence of border-crossing perspectives occurred in a protracted process, one may find the frequently evoked imagery of academic “turns”¹ slightly inadequate since it suggests a clear, pronounced change

¹ Among the many prominent examples are the debates about the cultural turn, the topological turn, and the spatial turn. An overview is provided by Döring and Thielmann (2008).

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of direction. It might be more fitting to use the term “trend,” which implies the idea of a more gradually changing climate of research interests and academic predilections.²

The latter should not suggest that the search for alternative conceptions of space has occurred without clearly visible signs and symbolic indications. In fact, one of them has been the broadening significance of the term “global history,” which has spread across many different world regions and languages. In Chinese, for instance, the expression *quanqiu lishi* or *quanqiu shi* has become more common, and the same has been the case with the Japanese *gurobaru reikishi*, or the German *Globalgeschichte*.³ Yet while field designations, names, and labels play an important role in the spread of an intellectual trend, they should not be confused with these academic transformations as such. As my explorations of very different realms of historical scholarship will reveal, the research commonly subsumed under “global history” is so diverse that it cannot possibly be pinned down through exact definitions and precise categorizations. It is also not feasible to properly separate “global history” from several other terminological options such as “world history” or “transnational history.” For this reason, I will mainly use terms such as “global history” as shorthand for many types of research reaching beyond those conceptions of space that have long dominated many, academic and other, ways of conceptualizing the past.

The following chapters, some of which are case studies of global history in single societies, do not altogether ignore many of the great challenges in mapping out translocal historical scholarship now as well as during earlier periods. Yet the primary goal of this book is not to provide a comprehensive bird’s eyes view of border-crossing and global historical research in its present state. Rather, my work seeks to make a theoretical intervention based upon the idea that an important facet of global history’s intrinsically diverse nature lies in the fact that this trend is currently experiencing surging levels of interest in many parts of the world. At the same time as in the West, an increasing number of scholars in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere have become convinced that much of human history is not best understood by containing our investigations within particular national or regional visions. Moreover, in many academic communities, new forms of institutionalization and

² See, for example, Veit-Brause (1990).

³ A special case is the French term “histoire globale,” which originally mainly connoted all-encompassing approaches to a given theme in history. Yet more recently, the term also started to be used in the sense of “global history.” For example: Beaujard, Berger and Norel (2009).

interdisciplinary cooperation have started supporting historical research cutting across national and other boundaries. This wider proliferation of global and transnational historical research, I believe, warrants further reflection, particularly in terms of its conceptual implications and practical consequences.

In that sense, this book is centered on the idea that the debates about the possibilities and dangers of global history cannot just be conceptual in a narrow, methodological sense. They also need to address factors such as the international academic settings underlying the field, for these doubtlessly influence the ideas of historians. As scholars experimenting with hitherto unusual spatial paradigms, historians involved in the global history trend need to become critically aware of the mental, institutional, local, and global spaces within which they operate. Actually, for theories of global history it is important to ask the same sets of questions that historians apply to the study of academic movements and professional networks of the past. If global historians fail to consider their own sociologies of knowledge, as well as the multifarious social, political, and cultural contexts framing their activities, the conceptual debates in the field will only be a pale reflection of what they potentially could be. In other words, the skills of global historians need to include an exceptionally high degree of professional self-reflexivity. Obviously, the theoretical discussions surrounding historical research on human interactions, shared spaces, and encounter zones can only continue proliferating if the relationship between history and historiography becomes more complex.

Thus far, there have been excellent overviews of translocal and world historical scholarship, its path dependencies, and state of the art, but the vast majority of such accounts have primarily focused on academic work in single languages.⁴ Some other publications, most notably edited volumes, have provided international perspectives on the field but in most cases they relegate the analysis of different, usually nationally specific world historical traditions to separate chapters.⁵ Given these methodological frameworks, the transnational flows, dynamics, and hierarchies that characterize today's global historical scholarship have only been given scant attention. Perhaps surprisingly, also many important theoretical contributions to global and world history have not made explicit efforts to traverse many national or

⁴ For example, for the Anglo-American world: Manning (2003); and Bentley (1996b).

⁵ Providing essays on the state of the art in several societies: Manning (2008b). About world history in (mostly) Western societies see Stuchtey and Fuchs (2003). See also Loth and Osterhammel (2000); and Middell (2002b).

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linguistic boundaries in the body of scholarship they consider. Especially in Western academia, self-reflective walls continue to surround many conceptual exchanges on global history, with voices from other parts of the world often going unnoticed. This is particularly problematic since the reason for these awareness gaps is not a lack of available information about global historical research in other parts of the world. As a matter of fact, overviews of global and world historical research in various countries have been published in English and some other Western languages. But so far there have been only few debates on how contemporary approaches to global history could enrich scholarship in the West. Nor have most Western discussions of global history addressed the question of how research in this area could contribute to an international research environment that needs to become more communicative, cooperative, and dialogical in nature. Polemically speaking, much of global history in Europe and North America remains more characterized by a rising interest in scholarship *about* the world rather than scholarship *in* the world.

Such widespread neglect of recent scholarship produced elsewhere would be at least more explicable if the global trend in historical scholarship had mainly originated in the West. Yet while our global academic system remains characterized by very problematic hierarchies, it would be far too simplistic to treat the Anglo-American academic world or any other part of “the West” as the main originator of the current wave of transnational scholarship. At a closer look it turns out that the main forces behind the growing weight of translocal historical thinking did not emanate from a clearly recognizable epicenter. Instead, the vibrant topographies of the global historical trend need to be envisioned as a complicated interaction between local and global factors. Moreover, there are good reasons to assume that, despite all international entanglements, border-crossing research is not undergoing a process of worldwide convergence. Very specific themes, methodologies, and public issues continue to characterize global and transnational history in various societies. For instance, even the most global of all terms, “globalization,” carries very different spectrums of meanings in various languages, and the same is true for other concepts such as “modernity” or “history.” Depending on the specific local setting, also the dominant antitheses to “global history” can vary: while in some cases it is mainly the nation, in others it is the region, or some notion of cultural or ethnic belonging.

Paying due attention to local peculiarities in the project of global history, however, requires some caution not to exoticize scholarship in different parts of the world. In today’s intellectual and academic

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landscapes, the global and the local are enmeshed with each other in a wide variety of ways. Historical research at today's academic institutions is to a large degree the result of global transformations, many of which were tied to the worldwide emergence of the nation-state. In addition, since the very beginnings of modern historiography, academic concepts and schools of thought have crossed political, linguistic, and other boundaries. For example, new trends such as the rise of social history or, later, the cultural turn could be felt in many world regions. In many scholarly communities, historiography became quite fragmented in terms of its research approaches, and transnational connections have been an important facet of many methodological schools. Nevertheless, historiography never evolved into an academic discipline that would – analogous to the natural sciences – come to work with a largely identical spectrum of methodological schools all over the globe. Among other forces, also national or regional contingencies keep seasoning the disciplinary fabrics of historiography. This is, for example, the case with specific institutional settings, the availability of funding, political influences, modes of public memory, and the overall intellectual climate. It is thus highly likely that local factors will continue to influence the spectrum of global historical visions even if methodological diversification and international academic connections become more intense.

Considering the complex nature of modern research landscapes makes it almost impossible to reflect upon the trajectories of global historical scholarship without paying due, critical attention to the cultures and structures of modern academic historiography. In that sense, thinking through the current global historical trend leads back *ad fontes* to some very foundational questions surrounding the basic structures and guiding principles of historiography. A move into such directions may seem somewhat unusual – in many countries, among them the United States, fervor for debating the very basic premises of the field seems to have disappeared for decades. In 2002, this situation prompted Lynn Hunt, then president of the American Historical Association, to ask “where have all the theories gone?”⁶

Reflecting upon the nature of the global historical trend in different parts of the world may provide ample opportunities to revisit such crucial themes such as international hierarchies of knowledge or the public roles of historiography. Given the significant intellectual challenges surrounding such problems, it is not only desirable but also necessary to build bridges between the debates on global history and other fields of intellectual activity. This is particularly the case when we

⁶ Hunt (2002).

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reflect upon the implications of the global historical trend for scholarship in different parts of the world and potential modes of cooperation between them. Here the project of global history can gain a wealth of new productive questions from dialogues with various critical positions. For example, it might be fruitful to more systematically take into account at least some aspects of theoretical interventions regarding the relationship between Western-centrism and the cultures of historiography.⁷ Similar things could be said about academic fields surrounding more public themes such as the idea of a global civil society, which are usually not centered in history departments.⁸

Needless to say, the pluralistic character of global history and the growing quest for multiperspectivity will hardly allow for a resurgence of monopolizing theories and grand frameworks of explanation, which are supposed to fit all local cases equally and unequivocally. A presumptuous claim of this kind would run directly counter to the program of thinking about global history in a plural world. Instead of developing models that are supposed to be applicable all over the world, it is necessary to reflect upon the challenges and opportunities inherent in the cross-regionally entangled landscapes of global history. This may help to advance dialogues and transnational modes of cooperation in a research field which more than any other branch of historiography is based on the notion of shared spaces.

In other words, while new all-encompassing theories are not suitable for the quest to combine global awareness with local sensitivity, it might be the right time to bring back to the debating table some weighty problems surrounding the nature of historiography as a sociological phenomenon and epistemological endeavor. In such a manner, this book does not search for a new universality but rather for some form of commonality in a very modest sense: it intends to contribute to historical scholarship, finding more common ground where different viewpoints can be negotiated. More concretely, it seeks not only to inject some new perspectives into the theoretical debates on global history as an academic trend, it also strives to help to render the very basic sociologies, institutional structures, disciplinary value systems, and objectives of historiography into the subjects of more sustained discussions. This will surely need to be an aspect of reflecting upon global history in a changing world – a world whose true complexities are often hidden behind the buzzword of “globalization.”

⁷ Theoretical interventions that are particularly relevant for reflections on global history are, for example, Mignolo (2000); and Chakrabarty (2000).

⁸ For example, Kaldor (2003); Iriye (2002); and Habermas (2000).

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Global perspectives on global history

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A book that is both globally interested and locally sensitive cannot possibly set up an Archimedic point around which its entire narrative can be moved. If one takes the claim for local contingency seriously, it is impossible to solely focus on alleged worldwide commonalities that may characterize a growing trend in historiography. At the same time, it would be impracticable to discuss only local theaters of global historical research since this would inevitably overlook the multifarious forms of transnational interconnections and exchanges in the field. It is thus necessary for this book to alternate perspectives between global overviews and local case studies. Yet such a dual approach is not merely a set of methodological crutches but instead reflects the nature of global history as a transnational research environment. Like many academic disciplines in today's world, its contours are constantly evolving along the contact lines of local and translocal dynamics. Yet similarly to Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle about the dual nature of position and momentum in a given particle, it will not be possible to conceptualize both the local states and the global waves of an academic field at the same time. For the sake of combining global outlooks with decentered viewpoints, it is therefore methodologically advantageous to adopt rather separate approaches to each aspect.

Epistemological challenges of this kind require *Global Perspectives on Global History* to be composed along two axes. While the first chapter and the epilogue explore general questions and transnational dynamics related to global history, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on single languages and academic communities. Both groups of chapters pursue different lines of inquiry as well as distinct narrative strategies. The globally oriented parts of the book primarily operate from an "outside in"⁹ viewpoint. The first chapter mainly illuminates the interplay between global environments, transnational dynamics, and national parameters that need to be understood as frameworks of the global historical trend. Informed by the case studies, the Epilogue returns to the primarily global perspectives of the first chapter. It does so by ruminating on potential intellectual directions and public interventions of future global historical scholarship, particularly if the field comes to be more characterized by transnational academic structures, networks, and interactions. Taking a different approach, the other parts of the book investigate global and transnational history in the United States,

⁹ My thanks go to Prasenjit Duara for providing me with this metaphor, which he uses in Duara (2009), p. 1.

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Germany, and mainland China¹⁰ chiefly from “inside out,” which means that they primarily focus on local dynamics in these societies. In addition to developments in academic theory and practice, I also consider relevant factors ranging from social transformations to changing political circumstances. Moreover, I pay attention to important transnational dynamics such as the effects of intellectual migration on US academia or the repercussions of European integration on German scholarship.

Due to the complexity of today’s transnational landscapes of scholarship, there were several options for drawing the boundaries of my case studies. It certainly would have been possible to focus on global and transnational trends published in single languages. For example, Anglophone, Francophone, and Sinophone publications are being produced across a wide variety of political boundaries, academic communities, and economic systems. Yet even in the relatively confined public spheres of academia, linguistic realms form such intricate patterns that the task of mapping them out properly would necessitate book-length studies for each case, particularly if one were to pay due attention to their connections, geographical variations, and hierarchies of knowledge. For example, within the English-speaking world there are huge disparities between the conditions and backgrounds of academic production in North America, Europe, India, sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia. Similar observations could be made about a range of other languages, including some such as French, Spanish, and Portuguese, which like English spread globally under the impact of colonialism. Yet even in the languages central to my second and third case study, Chinese and German, publications are also being produced across a variety of political contexts, academic systems, and topographies of historical memory.¹¹

¹⁰ The term “mainland China” (Chinese *zhongguo dalu*) commonly refers to the People’s Republic of China, excluding Hong Kong and Macao due to continued differences in political systems and socioeconomic conditions. While in Taiwan and some other regions the term long had rather clear political connotations, the expression has now come to be used across different political and ideological camps. In the following I will mainly use “China” for the mainland and “Greater China” as a marker that includes Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. In some other usages, “Greater China” also refers to overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world.

¹¹ For a discussion of different global historical approaches in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan see Q. Wang (2010a). Compared to these differences in the Chinese-speaking world (which also includes centers of higher learning in Singapore), the differences between the German-speaking countries are rather small.

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It is thus not only for reasons of narrative feasibility that, in my locally oriented chapters, I decided to primarily focus on three national academic systems. As these parts of the book show, national parameters continue to be of high importance for historical scholarship, and they are so through many factors ranging from specific funding systems to dominant public discourses. At the same time, it is certainly not the case that research landscapes, publication patterns, and the spread of methodological schools can be clearly divided along national lines. In my case studies, I seek to do justice to an academic environment in which national systems are factors but not firm units in international research. While I mainly focus on structural transformations in single national systems, I do not brush over flows or exchanges of ideas within and across single languages. For example, I certainly do not disregard publications that came to be influential in the United States, Germany, and China even though they have been produced elsewhere.

My attention to interconnections, exchanges, and other dynamics across different academic systems is not the only way in which my methodology departs from the analytical scaffold of a structural comparison. While I investigate the backgrounds and trajectories of global historical scholarship in all three cases, I do not apply exactly the same timelines, categories and questions to each of them. Doing so would mean knitting a systematic straitjacket, depriving my study of the necessary space to remain sensitive to the multifaceted local contingencies and global entanglements, which frame transnational historiography in different parts of the world. Rather, my approach remains largely narrative in character, allowing me to treat global historical scholarship in China, Germany, and the United States as nodes in more complex international nexuses.

To be more precise, Chapters 2 to 4 are not solely meant to identify commonalities and differences across the three case studies, for their respective viewpoints are also meant to complement each other. This is particularly the case since none of the locally oriented chapters aims to provide an exhaustive overview of all world historical traditions as well as recent global and transnational historical research. Rather, each chapter accentuates particular aspects and developments of global and transnational history as a wider trend. These are important for the respective local context but at the same time exemplify problem zones that can also be observed in other academic systems. For example, only the first case study, which focuses on the United States, goes into considerable detail when discussing the problem of how to define the expression “global history,” particularly vis-à-vis a wide range of alternative terminological options. The following chapters cover this topic more briefly but put

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their emphasis on other facets of the global historical trend such as – in the Chinese case – theories of modernity that can hardly be ignored when assessing current developments in global and transnational historical research.

Hence, while the main framework of this book cannot possibly be held together by identical levels of inquiry, the following chapters feed into each other in the sense that they make different characteristics of the same field visible and accessible. In this context, it is important to point out that neither the outlooks of the case studies nor the macroscopic viewpoints taken in the other sections of this book can adequately reflect the entanglements between global and local elements. In fact, none of them should be conceptualized as prior or superordinate to the other. Combined and yet rather separate, however, global perspectives and local viewpoints allow us to navigate the complexities of historical scholarship without getting stranded on either side.

Since this book seeks to make a theoretical intervention, it grants more weight to recent developments within historiography and related fields. While I do not disregard some historical origins and long-term trajectories that are important to understanding global history in its current state, the main emphasis rests on the present. Moreover, within the contemporary body of scholarship, I prioritize the historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and discuss research on earlier periods only to a lesser extent. I do so because in the study of modern history, the contrast between the national orientations of historiography and the ever-intensifying global interconnections of the same age is particularly stark. Often faced with an uncongenial mainstream, here the rise of global and transnational approaches typically assumes its most revisionist character. Another reason for concentrating on the historiography of the more recent past lies in the archaeologies of the future, the necessary process of introspection that global history will need to experience. The study of global historical topics ranging from the formation of modern academic systems to transnational public spheres can help provide important insights for changes the field may have to face in the future. In that manner, the subjects and objects of global historical study can enter an unusually direct relationship of exchanges.