

## Introduction: For a Global Historical Sociology

---

*Julian Go and George Lawson*

### **Why Global Historical Sociology?<sup>1</sup>**

Would it be an exaggeration to claim that there has been a “global” revolution in the social sciences? Witness, in disciplinary history, the rise of “global history” and “transnational history.”<sup>2</sup> Ever since Akira Iriye’s (1989) call for historians “to search for historical themes and conceptions that are meaningful across national boundaries,” historians have institutionalized transnational history as a prominent subfield, one that can be seen in journals, books, conferences, course offerings, and job lines. Witness, too, the proliferation of “globalization” studies (e.g., Castells 1996; Held et al. 1999; Beck 2006; Beck 2012) and the attempt to institutionalize a “global sociology” (Burawoy 2000; Burawoy 2008), moves intended to explore new cosmopolitan identities and trace social processes at transnational and global scales (also see Wallerstein 2001). Consider finally the discipline of International Relations (IR). For much of its disciplinary history, IR has studied the workings of a small part of the world (the West) through a relatively sparse analytical lens (the “states under anarchy” *problematique*). In recent years, IR scholarship has begun to make clear the ways in which the emergence of the discipline

<sup>1</sup> For helpful comments and suggestions on this Introduction, we thank the volume contributors and especially Julia Adams, who also helped secure some of the funding for our meeting at Yale. We also thank two anonymous reviewers for CUP, as well as Colin Beck, Craig Calhoun, Elisabeth Clemens, Jack Goldstone, Janice Bially Mattern, Gagan Sood, Nicholas Wilson, and commentators and audiences at sessions on the paper at the 2014 Social Science History Association meetings (Chicago), the 2015 International Studies Association meetings (New Orleans), the 2015 British International Studies Association Meetings (London), and the 2015 Northeast Regional ISA meetings (Providence). For funding the meetings at LSE and Yale, we thank Boston University’s College of Arts & Sciences, the International Relations Department at the LSE, and the Kempf Fund of Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> Although distinctions can be drawn between these two enterprises (e.g., Zimmerman 2013), we see the turn to global history and transnational history as representing a single movement in that both situate themselves in opposition to “internalism” and “methodological nationalism.” These terms are defined below.

2 Julian Go and George Lawson

was intimately associated with issues of colonial management (e.g., Vitalis 2010, 2016), the diverse range of polities that constitute the international system (e.g., Phillips and Sharman 2015), and the myriad of social forces, from market exchanges to cultural flows, that make up “the international” (e.g., Hobson, Lawson and Rosenberg 2010). The academy’s most overtly “international” discipline is finally going “global” (Tickner and Blaney eds. 2012).

The essays in this collection join and advance this revolution. But they do so from a particular standpoint: “Global Historical Sociology” (GHS). By “Global Historical Sociology” we mean the study of two interrelated dynamics: first, the *transnational* and *global* dynamics that enable the emergence, reproduction, and breakdown of social orders whether these orders are situated at the subnational, national, or global scales;<sup>3</sup> and second, the *historical* emergence, reproduction, and breakdown of transnational and global social forms. The first of these dynamics provides the “global” in our enquiry; the second constitutes the “historical sociology.” While historical sociology is a long-established interdisciplinary field concerned with incorporating temporality in the analysis of social processes, we conceive global historical sociology as the study of the *transnational* and *global* features of these processes. Such features vary widely, ranging from the global dynamics of capitalist accumulation to the role of transnational ideologies and social movements in fostering change within and across state borders – to many things besides. With this emphasis on the transnational and global, Global Historical Sociology as an intellectual project emerges from the subfield of historical sociology even as it seeks to extend it.

The motivation behind our attempt to advance Global Historical Sociology is clear: it is, quite simply, *to keep up with the world*.<sup>4</sup> After decades (or more) of globalization, and centuries of imperial formations before that, we are far from a world – if we ever inhabited one – when social science could attend dutifully to issues only “at home”; that is, in the sequestered sites of our particular territories. It took a special form of parochial vanity to imagine that historical development arose from the endogenous characteristics of a handful of powerful polities. Recent historical work has done

<sup>3</sup> Once again, although transnational and global are not synonyms, we treat them as part of a single field of enquiry in that they are both concerned with connections that do not take place solely within states. The same is true for the term “international.” In broad terms, “international” refers to relations between social orders (which are not limited to nation-states), “transnational” means transboundary relations across social sites, and “global” is an encompassing term that denotes interconnectedness and spatially expansive social relations.

<sup>4</sup> It is telling that, according to figures from the American Sociological Association, job lines in “comparative-historical sociology” are few and far between, while job lines in “transnational and global” areas are rising – and fast.

much to demolish these assumptions (e.g., Pomeranz 2000; Christian 2004; Bayly 2004; Belich 2009; Osterhammel 2014). It has shown that the world has long been a space of “imperial globality” in which historical trajectories have been intertwined through power relations (Burton and Ballantyne 2012: 13). Yet many scholars remain wedded to research that explains the historical trajectory of a country via dynamics *internal* to that territory, combining this with attention to the ways in which other territories lack comparable dynamics. In this way, much of the modern academy is home to two misconceptions: first, assuming that the world is made of stable entities that are, in turn, comprised of stable attributes; and second, bracketing off “internal” and “external” in a way that serves to harden and, ultimately, reify these spheres.

Regarding the first misconception: historical sociology has long formed part of the challenge to “attributional” thinking – the notion that “the social world consists of fixed entities (the units of analysis) that have attributes (the variables)” (Abbott 2001: 39). In this understanding, the interaction of attributes leads to stable patterns, patterns that persist regardless of context.<sup>5</sup> Yet, if the world is not composed of static entities with timeless properties but, rather, is “on the move,” then there is no static unit of analysis and no set of universal properties that can be attributed to these units. In this understanding, social formations contain neither ascribed properties nor fixed attributes. If all social objects are made and remade in and through time, then they are necessarily “entities-in-motion” and can be studied as such. In this regard, GHS is informed by debates about the “eventfulness” and “historicity” of social relations (Sewell 1996a; Jackson 2006). As we discuss later in this introduction, GHS adopts a “relational” stance that examines the contextually bound, historically situated configurations of events and experiences that constitute social fields. This is why we seek *historical* analyses. On the one hand, social entities often *take on* the appearance of fixity. As Matthew Norton in Chapter 1 of this volume makes clear, the idea of “the state” is just such an appearance. So too is the notion of an autonomous “Western civilization” (Hobson Chapter 10). At times, the appearance of fixity leads to the creation of institutionalized orders with “thing-like” characteristics; again, the state is a good example (Norton Chapter 1; also see Mitchell 1991). On the other hand, the danger lies in naturalizing in our analyses what is constructed in practice. Historical analysis is the antidote. It helps us denaturalize; it helps us escape the trap of taking something as fixed when it is actually constituted through temporally located, social processes. Hence our project: global *historical* sociology.

<sup>5</sup> It also leads to theory-construction as little more than “hunting for variables” (Krause 2010).

Regarding the second misconception – that is, the bracketing of “internal” and “external” that serves to harden and, ultimately, reify distinctions between ostensibly stable social entities – we operate from the recognition that such “analytic bifurcation” and the debates that ensue (“the global” vs. “the local”; “globalization” vs. the “nation-state”) are untenable (Bhambra 2007a; Magubane 2005; Go 2013a). Any historically informed social scientific study, whether engaged with dynamics of war making (Barkawi Chapter 2) or the construction of sexualities (Patil Chapter 6), must engage with the international, transnational, and global entanglements within which such processes are embedded. Indeed, analysis of this kind is premised on the ways in which the relations between people, networks, institutions, and polities *drive* such dynamics. This does not mean that attention to global processes and scales serves as an alternative to national or subnational processes; rather, the *connections* between these scales require unpacking (Sassen 2007). Social sites “at home” and “over there,” the “foreign” and the “domestic,” the “East” and the “West,” “metropole,” and “colony” are not easily analytically separable any more than they are empirically discrete. To the contrary, as the various contributions to this volume make clear, these presumably separate sites are often intimately connected. Yet a combination of “internalism” and “methodological nationalism” has occluded these connections and the wider dynamics they form a part of.<sup>6</sup> Our goal is to make such connections explicit, demonstrating how a range of transnational dynamics, forms, and processes are generative of world historical development, from the formation of the idea of modern Europe (Shilliam Chapter 5) to the role of families in the expansion of capitalism (Hung Chapter 7). Accordingly, just as our project is *historical*, so too is it *global*. By this term, and related terms like “transnational,” we do not mean an ontological space with a discreet logic of its own. There are relatively few sites of social action that are constituted at the planetary scale. Rather, “the global” and “the transnational” are encompassing terms that mark out spatial and analytical *scales* of social interaction that need to be taken seriously, but which have often been effaced.

The “global” in our title *Global Historical Sociology*, therefore, is a strategic sign under which this project can be gathered rather than an ontological commitment or a claim about a particular set of theoretical

<sup>6</sup> By “internalism,” we mean analytical narratives and causal explanations that are confined to dynamics within a particular territory. By “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Schiller 2002), we mean two related assumptions: first, that the boundaries of social relations map directly onto the boundaries of the nation-state; and second, that nation-states form the natural unit of social scientific analysis. As the next section makes clear, there is a close association between “methodological nationalism” and “state-centrism.”

categories. For the contributors to this volume, there is no opposition between “the global” and the “transnational” on the one hand, and the “local” and “the national” on the other. Taking such a stance would mean replacing one centrism (nation-state-centrism) with another (global-centrism). Our intention is the opposite of this – to break down the binary though which global and national scales have been made to appear mutually exclusive. The use of the term “global” in the volume is deliberately intended to be encompassing. Rather than starting analyses from the assumptions of methodological nationalism, global historical sociology starts from the assumption of interconnectedness and spatially expansive social relations.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the title “Global Historical Sociology” represents an interest in social relations as they unfold in time and as they are articulated on multiple scales. But we also see the title as marking out a space that has not already been fully captured by disciplinary or subdisciplinary classifications. Consider the work of our colleagues in “transnational” and “global history” (e.g., Bayly 2004; Zimmerman 2013; Rosenberg ed. 2012; Iriye ed. 2013; Osterhammel 2014). This work is generative of global historical sociology in two ways: first, through its attendance to temporality and historicity; and second, because it is concerned with connecting events, people, and processes that are usually cordoned off simply by virtue of taking place in different national territories. Yet, although there is much to learn from this work, there are also key differences between GHS and transnational/global history. While, like transnational and global history, GHS is concerned with temporality and historicity, it differs from these enterprises in its explicit focus on *social* relations, overarching patterns or structures, social forms, and causal mechanisms. While GHS does not promote any particular theory, program, or grand narrative, it does embed historical enquiry within broader social scientific questions and approaches. This means engaging fully with transnational and global histories, while occupying a register at one remove from such studies through the overt deployment of conceptual abstractions, analytic schemas, and theoretical frames.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Note that, in North America, “historical sociology” is institutionally designated in conjunction with “comparative” sociology. For example, the official section of the American Sociological Association for historical sociology is the “Comparative and Historical Sociology Section.” Our replacing of “comparative” with “global” to form “Global Historical Sociology” rather than “comparative historical sociology” is deliberate: we seek to replace the basic assumption of comparison (the idea that units can be separated) with the assumption of connectedness that the signifier “global” conveys.

<sup>8</sup> We do not want to overplay the distinction between “history” and “theory” – both are intimately co-implicated (Lawson 2012). Rather, our point is that history, sociology, and

In turn, the *historical* signifier in GHS helps to differentiate GHS from much globally oriented sociology. Sociologists studying globalization (e.g., Beck 2006; Castells 1996; Held et al. 1999) tend to argue that dynamics of interconnectedness and interdependence, “global cities,” “global civil society,” and “cosmopolitanism” are new, as if everything before the second half of the twentieth century was of a local, parochial nature. As numerous studies have shown, such a view does not stand up to scrutiny (e.g., Hirst and Thompson 1996; Bayly 2004; Christian 2004; Rosenberg ed. 2012; Iriye ed. 2013). The lack of sufficient concern for temporality and historicity in much contemporary sociology is a long-standing charge (e.g., Abbott 2001; Sewell 1996b). This volume both renews and extends such critiques by concentrating explicitly on transnational and global dynamics of order-making.

In sum, GHS operates in a different register from both transnational and global history, while seeking to add a concern for historicity and temporality to sociology’s global imagination. But it also does more: it melds historical sociology and IR. As we explore in the next section, even when mainstream historical sociology has attended to the “global,” it has done so in a limited way, remaining wedded to various forms of state-centrism. At the same time, much mainstream IR has assumed an asocial and ahistorical character, thereby precluding analysis of key features of international relations, whether these be the generative role of imperialism in the formation of contemporary international order or the diversity of forms that international orders have assumed over time and place. Scholars undertaking historical sociological work under the umbrella of disciplinary IR have done much to limit these asocial and ahistorical myopias, just as scholars within historical sociology have begun to awaken historical sociology’s “global imagination” (Magubane 2005; see also Go 2014a). Putting these strands together is a core task of GHS.

### Globalizing Historical Sociology

If, as argued in the previous section, there has been a “global revolution” in the social sciences, our first premise is that the tools of historical sociology can and should be mobilized to join it. What is historical sociology after all? While historical sociology as an institutional field (or more precisely a subfield) of inquiry is multifaceted, it shares certain

IR have their own particular versions of the history-theory relationship. These relationships are not natural; rather, they have been forged historically through particular disciplinary dynamics. Hence, *in principle* the difference between global historical sociology and transnational/global history is somewhat arbitrary, *in practice* some significant differences between these enterprises have accumulated over time.

underlying concerns and themes. Besides its concern with temporality, which requires close attention to processes of change, sequence and the unfolding of action over time, historical sociology's underlying rubric is its focus on the modern; more specifically, on the emergence and constitution of modernity – or as Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005: 2) put it, in “how people and societies became modern or not.” From the classical founders of historical sociology such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, and W. E. B. DuBois to its “first wave” represented by Richard Bendix, Barrington Moore Jr., and the early work of S. N. Eisenstadt, historical sociology has sought to illuminate the dynamics and dilemmas involved in the emergence of modernity (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005: 3–7).<sup>9</sup>

A range of scholarship has begun to demonstrate that modernity has always been a transnational and global development, occurring on scales higher (and at times lower) than the nation-state, including through imperialism (e.g., Bhambra 2007a; Goody 1996; Pomeranz 2000; Hobson 2004; Sassen 2007). Industrialization, ideas of sovereignty and the modern, rational state: these and other core features of modernity were formed and continue to operate at transnational and global scales (Buzan and Lawson 2015). It follows that historical sociology, with its sustained interest in the constitution of modernity, should contribute to such enquiry. With the analytic rigor and theoretical innovation typical of the subfield, historical sociology could help to illuminate the emergence of global and transnational social forms over time. By going global, historical sociology has the capacity to show how and in what ways people, events, and social forms around the world are interrelated, while also explaining the logics that sustain these interactions.

Despite the promise contained in the potential shift to Global Historical Sociology, the subfield is at something of an impasse. One problem is that, as yet, historical sociology has not fully elaborated the concepts and theories that could be used in a systematic analysis of transnational and global processes. This is because, as with other branches of sociology, much historical sociology has been hindered by internalism and methodological nationalism. While, as noted in the previous section, historical sociology has been defined by its focus on temporality, historicity, and process, much of the *substantive* content of historical sociology has *not* been oriented around transnational or global

<sup>9</sup> We roughly follow Adams, Clemens, and Orloff's (2005) division of the “waves” of historical sociology but distinguish between the classical or canonical founders (e.g., Marx and Weber) and the “first wave” of the mid-twentieth century. Here our distinction is closer to that of Dennis Smith (1991), although we use slightly different labels than those adopted by Smith.

processes. To be clear: the issue is not that comparative historical sociology has narrowed its lens to Europe or the United States. As historical sociologists themselves make clear (e.g., Mahoney 2011), non-European parts of the world are firmly on the agenda.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the issue is that historical sociology has not yet systematically analyzed and theorized the connections *between* or *through* societies and states (whether in the West or elsewhere). In other words, historical sociology is known best for studies of state-formation, economic development, gender politics, class-formation, and social movements *within* states.<sup>11</sup> However rich such studies are, they are limited by dint of their methodological nationalism – even as transnational and global dynamics (in the form of markets, transnational ideologies, and interimperial conflicts) intrude on such accounts, they are rarely given adequate attention, let alone effectively theorized. At the same time, historical sociology is home to a range of comparative accounts that examine the divergent developmental pathways taken by particular states (e.g., Slater 2010, Mahoney 2010). Yet these studies are hindered by their internalism – again, even as transnational and global dynamics are often central to how these studies conduct their empirical analysis, such dynamics are neither effectively theorized nor integrated into causal accounts, which remain centered around endogenous factors. All in all, while there are promising glimmers of a turn to the global in historical sociological scholarship, historical sociology as a *subfield* has yet to carry out sustained, empirically driven, theoretically informed explorations of transnational and global dynamics.<sup>12</sup>

This is true, in particular, of the main work that came out of the “second-wave” of historical sociology (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005). Indeed, one can be forgiven for noting that second wave historical sociology has suffered from the same limitations that afflicted disciplinary history decades before its transnational turn: *state-centrism* (Go 2014a). This is the assumption that social relations are territorialized along state lines. Social processes, as well as cultural and political relations, are

<sup>10</sup> A related issue pertains to the Eurocentrism that such analysis often contains *regardless* of its empirical focus. See Bhambra (2007a) and Go (2013a).

<sup>11</sup> It would be impractical to cite all of the works on these themes, but for good overviews, see: Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005); Calhoun (1996); and Smith (1991).

<sup>12</sup> There are, as ever, exceptions to this rule. The most prominent exception is world systems analysis, which we return to below. Another partial exception is the subfield of revolutionary studies, where there has been a concerted attempt to combine international and domestic factors (e.g., Foran 2005; Goldstone 2014; Kurzman 2008; Ritter 2015). However, even in these studies, international factors tend to be seen either as the backdrop to, or dependent outcome of, revolutions – the heavy lifting in terms of causal explanation remains rooted in domestic factors (Beck 2011, 2014; Lawson 2015, and Chapter 3).

treated as “contained” by the nation-state. What counts occurs within the nation-state. Relations between states are less important; relations, processes, and forms through or “above” nation-states are of little interest either.<sup>13</sup> In the strongest form of state-centrism, such relations are bracketed out altogether.

Second wave historical sociology is not unusual in its state-centrism – such an orientation has dominated the social sciences since their inception, or at the very least since World War II (Taylor 1996; Wallerstein 2001). As will be seen in the following section, state-centrism in International Relations is something of a different issue. But for historical sociology, a particular brand of state-centrism was manifest in at least two ways (Go 2013a). The first is the more straightforward: the main objects of analysis have been nation-states. The historian Sven Beckert (in Bayly et al. 2006: 1455) usefully conceptualizes transnational history as premised upon “the interconnectedness of human history as a whole”; transnational history “acknowledges the extraordinary importance of states . . . but it also pays attention to networks, processes, beliefs, and institutions that transcend these politically defined spaces.” This does not characterize second wave historical sociology, which was instead interested in class-formation, types of political regimes, collective action and revolutions, welfare states, gender relations, or economic and political development *within* national states. This is most evident in the proliferation of research and theory on the state – the very research and theory for which second-wave historical sociology became renowned (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985). This work fruitfully examined state policies, welfare regimes, or other state forms. But it rarely if ever studied the international organizations that national states confronted, the transnational networks of ideas that stage managers formed part of, or the imperial webs that states were embedded within. Furthermore, the states theorized in this work were always “national states” (in Tilly’s 1990 terminology). They were rarely imperial-states or city-states, or members of regional associations and interstate organizations. Finally, the study of the state itself became dominant. Why emphasize the “state”? Why didn’t historical sociologists look at migration flows or the transatlantic slave trade, trading companies or international nongovernmental organizations, global health regimes or

<sup>13</sup> The earliest critiques of what was called “state-centrism” and is now also sometimes associated with “methodological nationalism” came from geographers like Taylor (1996, 2000) and Agnew (1994), before being taken up by Immanuel Wallerstein (2001), and others. Wimmer and Schiller (2002) discuss the issue in relation to migration studies; Beck (2006) uses the idea as a foil to mount his study of “cosmopolitanism”; Chernilo (2006, 2007) offers a sustained examination of its history and operation.

transnational women's movements? When "bringing the state back in," this scholarship blocked virtually everything else out.<sup>14</sup>

The point here is not to deny that the state is an important unit of analysis – of course, it is. Rather, the point is that a dominant focus on the state has acted as an obstacle to effective analysis. What began as an analytical move became, over time, an ontological one: the state acted as a cage not just of social scientific enquiry, but of social relations *in toto*. In other words, analysts acted as if states really were containers of ideas and practices. Yet there are a myriad of actors, forms, and processes operating at different scales that states try to manage, regulate, or discipline but which they ultimately cannot. One of the contentions of this volume is that states operate within a global and transnational social field and that they are influenced by a range of processes beyond those that lie within their formal control.

Some second-wave scholarship recognized this point. For example, Skocpol's (1979) seminal study of social revolutions *did* include analysis of international factors. Social revolutions, Skocpol (1979: 19) insisted, were shaped by global developments: "Transnational relations have contributed to the emergence of all social-revolutionary crises and have invariably helped to shape revolutionary struggles and outcomes." For Skocpol (1979: 22–30), the elision of international factors in previous accounts of revolution (not least by Barrington Moore, Jr.) was something she sought explicitly to rectify. Similarly, Charles Tilly (1990: 26) referred to international factors in his analysis of European state-formation: "Other states – and eventually the entire system of states – strongly affected the path of change followed by any particular state." For Tilly (1990: 23; also see Tilly 1975a: 42), competition between states in the form of war and preparation for war was the determining factor in dynamics of state formation: war made states just as states made war.

But here arises the second way in which historical sociology's nation-state-centrism made its appearance – as a "realist" theory of the international that limits this realm to the regulation of violence.<sup>15</sup> For most second wave historical sociology, the international system was treated as a bare space of "anarchy" largely devoid of empires, transnational networks of actors, ideas that crossed borders, cultural flows, and so on. As the next section makes clear, this is a radically impoverished vision of the international. There are processes, logics,

<sup>14</sup> One notable exception is the contribution by Peter Evans (1985) to *Bringing the State Back In*.

<sup>15</sup> We discuss the main contours of realism – and its inadequacies – in the following section.