

CHAPTER 1

Introduction



“All historians are world historians now,” C. A. Bayly has declared, somewhat provocatively—only to add, “though many have not yet realized it.”¹ Indeed, there can be no doubt that global/world history is currently booming. In the United States, and in the other parts of the Anglophone world, it has for several decades been the fastest-growing field within the discipline. This trend has also caught on in parts of Europe and East Asia, where global history is on the rise and finding increasing favor with a younger generation of historians. Journals and conventions are appearing everywhere, and in many settings “global dimensions” have become an almost obligatory feature of successful project proposals. But does this rise in popularity really mean that every historian is a global historian? Just what is it about global history that has made it so popular? And why is this happening now?

There are many reasons for this boom. Most significant has been the increased interest in global processes that followed first the end of the Cold War and then the events of September 11, 2001. Given the widespread fashion for seeing “globalization” as the key to understanding the present, the need to go back in time and explore the historical origins of this process

CHAPTER 1

seems self-evident. In many places, in particular in immigrant societies, global history is also a response to social challenges and to the demand for a more inclusive, less narrowly national perspective on the past. The shift in curriculum from Western Civ to global history in the United States is a typical result of such social pressures. Within the academy, trends of this nature are mirrored by changes in the social, cultural, and ethnic makeup of the profession. And, in turn, transformations in the sociologies of knowledge have reinforced dissatisfaction with the long-standing and pervasive tendency to conceive of national histories as the history of discrete, self-contained spaces.²

The communication revolution that began in the 1990s also has had an important impact on our interpretations of the past. Historians—and their readers—travel and experience more of the world than ever before. This increased mobility, further enhanced by the Internet, has facilitated networking and made it possible for historians to participate in global forums—though, admittedly, voices from formerly colonized countries are often barely discernible. As a result, historians today are dealing with a large number of competing narratives, and they see the potential for new insights precisely in this diversity of voices. Finally, the network logic that computer technology encourages has affected the thinking of historians, who increasingly employ a language of networks and nodal points to replace older territorial logics. Writing history in the twenty-first century is not what it used to be.

INTRODUCTION

*Why global history? Beyond Internalism
and Eurocentrism*

Global history was born out of a conviction that the tools historians had been using to analyze the past were no longer sufficient. Globalization has posed a fundamental challenge to the social sciences and to the dominant narratives of social change. Entanglements and networks characterize the present moment, which has itself emerged from systems of interaction and exchange. But in many respects, the social sciences are no longer adequately able to pose the right questions and generate answers that help to explain the realities of a networked and globalized world.

In particular, two “birth defects” of the modern social sciences and humanities hinder our ability to achieve a systematic grasp of processes that span the world. Both can be traced to the formation of the modern academic disciplines in nineteenth-century Europe. First, the genesis of the social sciences and humanities was tied to the nation-state. In their themes and questions, and even in their societal function, fields like history, sociology, and philology remained tied to a country’s own society. Beyond that, the “methodological nationalism” of the academic disciplines meant that, theoretically, the nation-state was presupposed as the fundamental unit of investigation, a territorial entity that served as a “container” for a society. The commitment to territorially bounded containers was more pronounced in the field of history than in some of its neighboring disciplines. Knowledge of the world was thereby discursively and institutionally prestructured in such a way as to obscure the role of exchange relationships. History, in most quarters, was limited to national history.³

Second, the modern academic disciplines were deeply Eurocentric. They placed European developments in the foreground and saw Europe as the central driving force of world history. Even more fundamentally, the conceptual toolbox of the social sciences and humanities abstracted European history to create a model of universal development. Ostensibly analytical terms like “nation,” “revolution,” “society,” and “progress” transformed concrete European experience into a (universalistic) language of theory that presumably applied everywhere. Methodologically speaking, then, by imposing categories particular to Europe on everybody else’s past, the modern disciplines rendered all other societies colonies of Europe.⁴

Global history is one attempt to face the challenges posed by these observations, and to overcome the two unfortunate birthmarks of the modern disciplines. It is thus a revisionist approach—even if it builds on a whole series of forerunners, for issues such as migration, colonialism, and trade have long been of concern to historians. An interest in examining cross-border phenomena may not in itself be new, but now it stakes a new claim. It means to change the terrain on which historians think. Global history, therefore, has a polemical dimension. It constitutes an assault on many forms of container-based paradigms, chief among them national history. As we will discuss in more detail in chapter 4, it is a corrective to internalist, or genealogical, versions of historical thinking that try to explain historical change from within.

At the same time, and beyond issues of method, global history aims to effect a change in the organization and institutional order of knowledge. In many countries, what is called “history” was long equated in practice with each country’s own national history: most Italian historians worked on Italy, most of their Korean colleagues studied Korea—virtually everywhere,

INTRODUCTION

generations of students were introduced to history through handbooks narrating the national past. Against this background, the call for global history comes as a call for inclusiveness, for a broader vision. Other pasts were history, too.

And even where history faculties are well staffed and prepared for broader coverage, courses tend to present the histories of nations and civilizations as monads, in isolation. Chinese textbooks on world history, for example, categorically exclude China—for the national past is taught in a different department. The compartmentalization of historical reality—into national and world history, into history and area studies—means that parallels and entanglements cannot come into focus. The case for global history is thus also a plea to overcome such fragmentation, and to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the interactions and connections that have made the modern world.

Global history is certainly not the only game in town, nor is it fundamentally superior as an approach. It is one approach among many, and it is better suited to addressing some questions and issues and less appropriate for addressing others. Its core concerns are with mobility and exchange, with processes that transcend borders and boundaries. It takes the interconnected world as its point of departure, and the circulation and exchange of things, people, ideas, and institutions are among its key subjects.

A preliminary and rather broad definition of global history might describe it as a form of historical analysis in which phenomena, events, and processes are placed in global contexts. There is disagreement, however, on how that result is best achieved. Numerous other approaches—ranging from comparative and transnational history to world and big history, to postcolonial studies and the history of globalization—currently

compete for scholarly attention. Just like global history, they endeavour to come to terms with the connectivities of the past.

Each of these different paradigms comes with an emphasis of its own, and we will take up some of the most prominent variants in chapter 3. However, one should not exaggerate the distinctions between them; there are also many commonalities and areas of overlap. In fact, it has proven difficult to define rigidly what makes global history specific and unique. And if we look at the actual usage of the term, the task does not get easier. Any superficial glance through the current literature immediately reveals that the term is used, and hijacked, for a variety of different purposes; frequently, it is employed interchangeably with other terms. Its widespread use betrays both the attractiveness and the elusiveness of the concept, rather than its methodological specificity.⁵

Three varieties of global history

In this situation of eclecticism and theoretical confusion, it may nevertheless be helpful to heuristically distinguish different reactions to the challenge of the “global.” Glossing over some of the specifics, they may be said to fall into one of three camps: global history as the history of everything; as the history of connections; and as history based on the concept of integration. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, it is the third approach that holds the greatest promise for global historians who aim to move beyond token gestures towards connectivity. Let’s take up the three varieties in turn.⁶

First, one way to approach global history is to equate it with the history of everything. “Global history, strictly understood,

INTRODUCTION

is the history of what happens worldwide,” write Felipe Fernández-Armesto and Benjamin Sacks, “across the planet as a whole, as if viewed from a cosmic crow’s nest, with the advantages of immense distance and panoptic range.” From such an omnivorous perspective, everything that ever happened on the earth is a legitimate ingredient of global history.⁷

In actual practice, this has led to very different strategies. The first is what we could call the all-in version of global history. Its most prominent variant is seen in works of large-scale synthesis that attempt to capture global reality in a specific period. The nineteenth century, for example, has found several sophisticated biographers, while other historians content themselves with a global panorama of a particular year. Yet others have extended the scope and portrayed whole millennia, if not the “history of the world” *tout court*. In the case of big history, the scale is expanded still further, covering the span from the Big Bang to the present moment. Whatever the scale, the general mode is identical: the “global” here refers to planetary comprehensiveness.⁸

In similar ways, historians have chosen to trace a particular idea or historical formation through the ages and across the planet. Particularly convincing examples of this kind are studies on the global history of empire that chart imperial formations and their strategies of population management from Ancient Rome (or from Tamerlane) to the present.⁹ But in principle, any subject will do for a global biography. We now have global histories of kingship, and of courtesans; histories of tea and coffee, of sugar and cotton, of glass and gold; histories of migration and trade; global histories of nature and of religion; histories of war, and of peace. The examples are legion.

While the term “global history” may thus suggest worldwide coverage, this is not necessarily the case. In principle, anything can become a legitimate focus for global historians: global history as omnibus. This means that even subjects as diverse as South African mine workers in Witwatersrand, the coronation of Hawaiian King Kalakaua, or a village in thirteenth-century Southern France could be studied for its potential contributions to global history. Once it is established that global history is everything, everything can become global history. This is less absurd than it seems. The situation was not so different in the days when national history reigned supreme. Then, too, even when the scope of a work did not necessarily extend to the nation as a whole, it was nonetheless assumed that it did. No one would doubt, for example, that a biography of Benjamin Franklin or an in-depth study of the automobile industry in Detroit was also a contribution to the history of the United States. Once the overall framework of a national history was established, everything within that container seemed like a natural ingredient.

The same is true for the all-in version of global history. Studies on the working classes in Buenos Aires, Dakar, or Livorno can contribute to a global history of labor, even if they do not explore those global horizons themselves. This is particularly the case if historians take account of, and are inspired by, studies on similar phenomena. Examples include Dipesh Chakrabarty’s book on jute workers in Bengal and Frederick Cooper’s study on dockworkers in Mombasa.¹⁰ The global history component is of course enhanced when historians conduct their studies with similar cases in mind and include books on related subjects in other parts of the globe in their bibliographies.

INTRODUCTION

A second paradigm in the field puts the focus on exchange and connections. This is the most popular form that research has taken in recent years. The common thread connecting these kinds of studies is the general insight that no society, nation, or civilization exists in isolation. From earliest times onward, human life on the planet was characterized by mobility and interaction. Therefore, such movements are the privileged subjects of a global history understood primarily as the history of entanglements. This infatuation with connectivity complements, and thus corrects, what we could call the frugality of earlier frameworks in which the intellectual journey came to a halt at the borders of the nation-state, empire, or civilization.

There is no limit to the range of topics that can be studied from such a perspective—from people on the move to circulating ideas and trade across distances. Again, the reach of the networks and connections may vary and does not have to be planetary. Everything depends on the subject matter and the questions asked: trade in the Mediterranean, the Hajj across the Indian Ocean, chain migrations between China and Singapore, or diplomatic missions to the Vatican. In all of these instances, the interconnectedness of the world, which can be traced back over centuries, is the starting point for global historical research.¹¹

Both versions of global history discussed so far apply in principle to all places, and to all times. The third and narrower approach is different, for it presumes, and explicitly reflects on, some form of global integration. At its core are patterns of exchange that were regular and sustained, and thus able to shape societies in profound ways. There have always been cross-border exchanges, but their operation and impact depended on the degree of systemic integration on a global scale.

This third model (it will be described in more detail in chapters 4 and 5) is the direction pursued by most of the more sophisticated recent studies—and it is the paradigm that will be explored in this book. Take as one example Christopher Hill’s work on the emergence of modern history writing in France, the United States, and Japan in the late nineteenth century. In it, the author does not focus on the relations between traditional history writing and modern national narratives, as a more conventional study might. Neither is the focus primarily on the connections between the three cases. Rather, Hill places all three nations in the context of domestic changes and global transformations. All three societies faced internal upheavals—the United States was recovering from Civil War and France from defeat at the hands of Prussia, while Japan was reshaping its polity in the wake of the Meiji Restoration. At the same time, all three were enmeshed in the fundamental restructuring of world order by capitalism and the imperialist state system. At this juncture, history writing served as a way to conceptualize the different position of each nation within this larger and hierarchical order, and to make the emergence of each as a nation-state seem necessary and natural. Analytically, then, Hill’s emphasis is on the global conditions that made possible and shaped the historical narratives emerging in the three settings.¹²

In much the same way, other historians have explicitly situated particular cases in their global contexts. They seek to explain “the contingencies and ground-level processes of human activity with[in] the structures that are at once the products and the conditions of that activity.”¹³ In this reading, the global becomes the ultimate frame of reference for any understanding of the past. In principle, such contextualization is not confined to the most recent past, but can be applied to earlier pe-

INTRODUCTION

riods, though in such cases the degree of integration may be rather weak. As the world has evolved more and more into a single political, economic, and cultural entity, causal links on the global level have grown stronger. And as a result of the proliferation and perpetuation of such links, local events are increasingly shaped by a global context that can be understood structurally or even systemically.

Process and perspective

Global history is both an object of study and a particular way of looking at history: it is both a process and a perspective, subject matter and methodology. Janus-faced, it resembles other fields/approaches in the discipline, such as social history and gender history. In practice, both dimensions are usually linked, but for heuristic purposes, we can keep them apart. This will enable us to differentiate between global history as the perspective of historians, and as a scale of the historical process itself.¹⁴

Global history is one perspective among others. It is a heuristic device that allows the historian to pose questions and generate answers that are different from those created by other approaches. The history of slavery in the Atlantic World is a good example. Historians have inquired into the social history of the slave population, into their working conditions, and into the ways in which they formed communities. By employing a gender approach, they have been able to tell new stories about families and childhood, sexuality and masculinity. The economic history of slavery has been especially prolific, focusing on productivity rates, on the standards of living of slaves compared to those of other workers and indentured servants,

and on the macroeconomic impact of slavery on plantation production. However, the experience of slavery and the slave trade can also be placed in a global context. This would underscore a different set of issues: the creation of a transatlantic space in the “Black Atlantic”; the repercussions of the trade on societies in West Africa; the connections of the Atlantic trade to complementary slave routes across the Sahara and the Indian Ocean; a comparison with other forms of enslavement, and the list goes on. Global history as a perspective highlights particular dimensions of the slave experience, while being potentially less attentive to others.

An important consequence of treating global history as a perspective, like gender history or economic history, is that research does not have to encompass the entire globe. This is an important caveat. The rhetoric of the global may suggest limitless coverage; but many topics are best displayed in smaller frames. This also means that most global history approaches do not attempt to replace the established paradigm of national history with an abstract totality called “world.” The aim is not to write a total history of the planet. It is often more a matter of writing a history of demarcated (i.e., non-“global”) spaces, but with an awareness of global connections and structural conditions. Many recent studies considered benchmarks in the field do not cover more than two or three locations. Global history, then, is not a synonym for macro-history. The most interesting questions often arise at the juncture where global processes intersect with their local manifestations.

On the other hand, however, global history is not *only* a perspective. A global history approach cannot be projected indiscriminately; it makes more sense for some periods, places, and processes than for others. Any attempt to contextualize

INTRODUCTION

globally needs to consider the degree and quality of the entanglements in its purview. The implications of the Vienna stock market crash in 1873 were not the same as those of the economic crises of 1929 and 2008—the degree to which the world economy and the media were integrated in the 1870s had yet to attain the level that would prevail in the twentieth century. In this respect, global history as perspective is often implicitly tied to assumptions about the ability of cross-border structures to have an impact on events, and on societies. We will return to this tension between process and perspective in the chapters that follow.¹⁵

The dialectic between perspective and process is a complex one. On the one hand, a global perspective on the tea trade makes more sense for the 1760s than for the Middle Ages, when global dynamics were of less influence. On the other hand, global connections seem to be particularly salient to us, in our globalized present, more so than they were for historians a few decades ago. To further confound matters, the resulting global perspective makes the eighteenth century appear more global than it was. Global perspectives and the course of global integration are thus inextricably interrelated.¹⁶

Heuristically, however, it is helpful to keep perspective and process apart. After all, the approach is much newer than the process; global history as a paradigm is of fairly recent origin, while the processes it studies reach far back into the past. As the two chronologies do not neatly correspond, it is useful to separate them analytically. Moreover, this is a field still very much in the making. For this reason, historians who attempt a global approach need to be self-conscious about methodology, and the chapters that follow will put the emphasis on this issue. Even if we assume that there is a process somewhere “out

there,” it is crucial to ponder the methodological challenges of uncovering it, and the implications of our choices.

Promises and limits

The global history trend is unlikely to slow down any time soon, and it has already helped to bring about some significant changes in historical scholarship. One clear indication of this is the fact that the major history journals, such as the *American Historical Review* and *Past & Present*, have increasingly published work in this new field. No longer merely a niche or sub-discipline, it has become mainstream, extending to both research and teaching. Specialized journals, book series, and conferences have created forums where scholars are encouraged to exchange ideas and discuss research. These forums do not exist merely in parallel to the rest of the discipline. They are not exotic. While “world history,” the global history of earlier decades, was most often an occupation of established and generally older historians, today even dissertations may pursue a global agenda. The approach has also influenced teaching, in both specialized seminars and even entire degree curricula. It is also interesting to note that debate over this approach has made its way to very diverse quarters. Environmental and economic historians are as interested in the global historical context as are social and cultural historians. Indeed, all aspects of historical scholarship can be subject to a global perspective.

In the light of the interconnectedness of today’s world, it is difficult to imagine that this trend might reverse itself. At the same time, there remain many obstacles to overcome. Institutionally, creating space for the new approach may prove an

INTRODUCTION

arduous process. Even in Western Europe and the United States, it can by no means be taken for granted that the discipline of history, so heavily dominated by the history of the nation, will be receptive to undertakings with a global historical scope. And even in settings where global perspectives have garnered general support, they compete with other approaches for funds and faculty positions. A new hire in global history might mean sacrificing a position in medieval history or in some other time-honored field related to the national past. Global history comes at a cost.¹⁷

The rise of global perspectives is unarguably an important development that helps us move away from a merely partial view of reality. As the relevance of territorial boundaries has been called into question, history has become more complex. In retrospect, some older studies may now appear to us like broadcasts of a football game that show only one of the two teams, to say nothing of other factors, such as the audience, weather conditions, and league ranking. Global history, by contrast, allows a wide-angle view of processes that were for a long time undetectable by the knowledge systems of the academy, or were at least considered irrelevant.

In important ways, then, this is a welcome and in some respects even liberating development. But as the old adage goes, change has its price. A global history approach is not a panacea or a free pass. Not every research project requires a global perspective; it is not always the global context that is most central to the issue. Everything is not linked and connected to everything else. It would be a mistake, certainly, to regard global history as the only valid approach—either in terms of its historiographical perspective or in the reach and density of the entanglements it explores. In every situation, a range of forces are at play, and it is not cross-border, let alone global, processes

CHAPTER I

that are *a priori* the most important. Many phenomena will continue to be studied in concrete, precisely demarcated contexts. Likewise, we must not lose sight of those historical actors who were not integrated into extensive networks, lest they fall victim to the current obsession with mobility. That said, it would nonetheless be difficult to turn back and forsake the insights that the global turn has generated.