

## History and Globalisation

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**In the age of globalisation, how can one write an open history of the world, of its exchanges, movements, and encounters? A recent issue of the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* gave a broad overview of the questions raised by “global history” and once more underlined the provincialism of French universities.**

Reviewed:

- ▶ Edited by Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard, “Histoire globale, histoires connectées: un changement d'échelle historiographique?”, *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, n° 54-4 bis, 2007.
- ▶ Pamela Kyle Crossley, *What is Global History?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008.
- ▶ Jack Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Several years ago, Marcel Détiénne vigorously protested against disciplinary seclusion and the nationalist leanings of the discipline of history in France in particular<sup>1</sup>. A special issue of the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* devoted to “global history” and to “connective histories” also noted this tendency in France to confine history within the boundaries of the nation-state and within metropolitan France in particular. The figures cited speak for themselves: according to the statistical analysis of directories for modern and

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Détiénne, *Comparer l'incomparable*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.

contemporary history published by the IHMC-CNRS in 1991, 55% of historians listed were French historians<sup>2</sup>. In 2000, from a total of 2060 historians listed, only 29 were specialised in Russia and the Slavic world, 19 in Chinese history, and 15 in Japan<sup>3</sup>. To illustrate this argument, the journal quotes Christophe Charle who, ten years ago, had already lamented that “the comparative history extolled by Marc Bloch, the shore-less history illustrated by Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel and demanded by CNRS commissions, has become nothing but a vain wish”<sup>4</sup>. On the basis of this observation, the main aim of the special issue was to look at possible ways out of this confinement and at how recent developments in global history and connective histories have changed historiographical scales. For the past ten years, such histories have been widely published in English, giving birth to a number of reviews that have largely gone unnoticed until very recently. Beyond the questions of historiographical scale, moreover, the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* also asks the question of Eurocentrism and the possibility of producing a more de-centred account of world history.

### **Beyond the nation-state**

According to Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard, coordinators of the special issue, the aim of “global history”, or “world history”, is to “move beyond the national compartmentalisation of historical research, to grasp all phenomena surpassing state boundaries”. This aim relies on the observation that national compartmentalisation “tends to spirit away or skirt around all phenomena of interrelation and interconnection, while sealing up frontiers and detaching objects from their contexts and cross-state ties”. Global history and its questioning of the nation-state framework is also justified because this framework is a relatively recent creation, the relevance of which, in terms of circumscribing phenomena prior to its arrival as a political entity, can obviously be questioned. Global history thus becomes a way of managing any risk of anachronism or teleological analysis. The nation-state as a framework for analysis is not the only target because global history can also be seen as a refusal of the monographic tradition that focuses on tracing the history of a region, a country or a city through a micro-historic approach that neglects distance, an approach that was

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Christophe Charle, “Les historiens français de la période moderne et contemporaine. Essai d’autoportrait”, *Lettre d’information de l’Institut d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 19, 1982, p. 8-18.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Daniel Roche (dir.), *Répertoire des historiens français de la période moderne et contemporaine. Annuaire 2000*, Paris, CNRS Edition, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Christophe Charle, “Être historien en France: une nouvelle profession?”, in François Bédarida (dir.), *L’histoire et le métier d’historien en France, 1945-1995*, Paris, Éditions de la MSH, 1995, cited by Caroline Douki, Philippe Minard, “Histoire globale, histoires connectées: un changement d’échelle historiographique?”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, n° 54-4 bis, 2007, p. 14.

criticised by Serge Gruzinski in the *Annales* several years ago<sup>5</sup>. Jean-Paul Zuniga, however, in his contribution to the special issue, refutes the axiomatic opposition of the two extremities used by historians in spatial scales. He observes that, in reality, there is no incompatibility between global history, which should be clearly distinguished from the “total history of our elders”, and the *microstoria*, of Italian origin, which was also extensively developed and should be distinguished from traditional local monographs. In both therein lies the same desire to departition disciplines and to break down conventional geographical and cultural partitions.

Global history obviously corresponds to a need for knowledge brought about by the recurrence of the theme of “globalisation” today. However, as Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard point out, self-styled global historians “agree on the absolute necessity of abandoning the false dichotomy presented by the two ways ‘globalisation’ is widely considered: on the one hand, it is considered as a recent phenomenon, characteristic of our contemporary era, and on the other, it is said that men, commodities and ideas have always moved around, and that there is nothing new under the sun”. The vocation of world history in their eyes should be to “periodise” and “historicise” globalisation taking into account the multiplicity of forms of contact, interconnections, and movement that it has brought about, to draw on all disciplines and thus escape the economic determinism that has been weighing on analysis.

Such studies require “global” tools to supply authors with contexts and frameworks to legitimate their work. In an issue of the *Annales* (2001) devoted to global history, Sanjay Subrahmanyam analyses the major phenomena that unified the world at the start of the modern period, enabling the inhabitants of various parts of the globe, despite their dispersion, to imagine for the first time events taking place on a genuinely global scale. He cited several types of event that historians had taken into account such as microbes “propagating from one end of Eurasia to the next during the great Mongol period and immediately afterwards, bringing about plague epidemics on the borders of Eurasian lands”. He also points to the example of silver and precious metals “the movement of which has been patiently traced throughout the world by other researchers, from the major deposits of Potosi in Bolivia from the 1570s, or from Japan at roughly the same time, sometimes causing inflation to a disastrous

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<sup>5</sup> Serge Gruzinski, “Les mondes mêlés de la monarchie catholique et autres *connected histories*”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, 56e année, n°1, janvier-février 2001.

extent and consequently social revolts”<sup>6</sup>. Alfred Crosby has shown that while small numbers of people crossed continents in the past, resulting in the exchange of microbes and genes among distant populations to a limited extent, the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century marked the start of a considerable increase in new physical contacts between the Europeans, Africans, Americans and inhabitants of certain Atlantic islands. Plants and animals too with a potential for agriculture and breeding started moving across the globe on a wide scale. However, these planetary-scale movements also sometimes annihilated old lifestyles and decimated ancient populations because of the devastating epidemics to which they gave rise<sup>7</sup>.

### **The refusal of grand narratives**

Global history however suffers from definition deficit. A recent work by Pamela Kyle Crossley<sup>8</sup> for example suggests dividing relevant work into four main strands. There are, first, those works dealing with the history of humanity and the processes of divergence from a common source, like those of Cavalli-Sforza<sup>9</sup>, which appeal to genetic analyses to try and retrace the process of populating the world, starting from Africa. She next cites those who, on the contrary, observe convergences based on universal historical laws, such as those elaborated by Marx for instance, whereby societies attain socialism by first passing through the tribal or community stage, then the Asian, ancient, feudal, and bourgeois (capitalist) stages, which has greatly inspired historiographies across the world. There are also those studies dealing with the contact between the different parts of the globe in the form of “contagions”, often taking the form of world pandemics. And there are those who have tried to show to what extent all parts of the globe have been caught up in the same system, the most famous representative of which is Immanuel Wallerstein and his “world system”, providing a model of western capitalism’s hegemony over the whole planet. By drawing together such diverse works Pamela Kyle Crossley could be rebuked for drawing up far too large and vague a portrait of this historiographical school and above all, for failing to explain the specific form of globalisation that has developed in the last ten years. The originality of the special issue of the *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* comes in its refusal of the “Grand Narrative” of the West’s advance towards modernity, and its refusal to simplify the larger systems of

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<sup>6</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Du Tage au Gange au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: une conjoncture millénariste à l’échelle eurasiatique”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, 56e année, n°1, janvier-février 2001, p. 51-84.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Westport Conn, Greenwood, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Kyle Crossley, *What is Global History*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Luigi Luca et Francesco Cavalli-Sforza, *The Great Human Diasporas: the History of Diversity and Evolution*, New York, Addison-Wesley, 1995.

historical interpretation at the heart of this new world historical method. They refuse, for example, to shut up historical dynamics in concepts such as those of “centre” and “periphery” used by Immanuel Wallerstein<sup>10</sup> while they show themselves willing to look into connections and movements in all forms, leaving no part of the world passive to the processes of transfer and mixity at work in the phenomena of globalisation.

For Romain Bertrand, “connective history” is at the heart of global history and above all a practical research approach in which cultural specialists such as Serge Gruzinski or Sanjay Subrahmanyam address the question of the rise of empires, in the case of the trans-oceanic imperial orders of the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Jean-Paul Zuniga shows for example how the vast terrain of enquiry that is the history of the Spanish empire reveals the way in which the different individual and collective logics at work in the process of integration should be apprehended in the practical form of their implementation in each precise social context. It is a matter, on the one hand, of looking at lifestyles and thoughts arising from phenomena of diversity and cultural adaptation produced by the formation of empires through the study of connections established between their different parts and the circulation of men, ideas, techniques, and resources. It is also important to produce a different narrative, free from ethno-centrism, of the coming of imperial “world systems” using sources from around the world, and not specifically European ones.

### **Abandoning Eurocentrism**

It is in this radical criticism of Eurocentrism that global history and connective histories differ from the already long tradition of historical analysis, placing itself in a global perspective. Global history is obviously not a new perspective. Karen Barkey, in her contribution, observes that we should also understand this historiographical movement within the intellectual tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, running through Spencer, Comte, Mill, Marx and Weber, and their search for general laws governing the evolution of societies throughout the world.

*The Theft of History* by the anthropologist Jack Goody, probably the most recent contribution to this debate, highlights the ethno-centric presuppositions and the teleological analyses aimed at explaining the economic and scientific rise of the West from the

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein seems nevertheless to have qualified his thesis and has evolved towards a critique of Euro-centrism, as can be seen in his article appeared in 1997 in the *New Left Review*: “Eurocentrism and its Avatars: The Dilemmas of Social Science”, *New Left Review*, n° 226, 1997.

Renaissance onwards and the reasons for which other more advanced civilisations such as China and the Arab world have stagnated and not undergone industrial revolutions. Goody sets out to show “how Europe has not only neglected or underestimated the history of the rest of the world, which leads it to misinterpret its own history but also how it has imposed its own concepts and periodisations, worsening our lack of comprehension of Asia in a manner that is as significant for the past as it is for the future”<sup>11</sup>. Goody’s contribution is particularly radical and stimulating in the sense that he doesn’t merely criticise authors whose ethnocentric presuppositions are well known today, like Marx or Weber, but also more recent analysts, who are *in principle* better immunized against such shortcomings. From Goody’s perspective, Joseph Needham’s examination of the extraordinary qualities of Chinese science is caught up in the teleological premise of its future undermining by western science, while Fernand Braudel’s long discussions on the origins of capitalism situate them wrongly, according to Goody, exclusively in Europe.

Global history is not simply concerned with toppling the major figures of the discipline; it also sometimes questions those methods that seemed most capable of explaining distant cultures. Comparative history was mauled by Sanjay Subrahmanyam and accused of Euro-centrism. Subrahmanyam’s reproach is that comparative history is too caught up in specific interpretative matrices based on underlying themes – such as the birth or the rejection of modernity, the construction of the State, or modes of production – or caught up in philosophies or theories of history that often find the answers to questions raised within themselves. The choices of subjects to compare, the framework and criteria for analysis, and selected determinisms – whether climatic, geographical, economic, technical or cultural – are too often defined by European standards to his mind<sup>12</sup>.

### **The institutional causes of French provincialism**

Giorgio Riello’s contribution to the special issue shows us how developed researcher networks, bringing together the different horizons necessary to global history and the creation of its objectives, has become in Britain. There are for example the Warwick Global History and Cultural Centre recently created by the University of Warwick, or the Global Economic History Network created by the department of economic history of the London School of Economics. The image that Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard paint of France is much

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, art. cit.

more pessimistic. They use their introduction to fairly virulently criticise French university institutions, questioning the “provincialism of French universities, the fundamental conservatism of an institution stubbornly resistant to international openings in comparison to other countries.” They are particularly surprised about the almost total silence reigning over the work of Kenneth Pomeranz on the “great divergence” between China and Western Europe<sup>13</sup>, whereas this important work has been the subject of considerable debate outside France. An equally negative appraisal was also provided in a recent report by Christophe Jaffrelot and Dominique Darbon on the state of French research into Asian political science, which has a worryingly low profile in French universities<sup>14</sup>.

However, one of the great merits of this issue of the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* is not simply to denounce the stifling effects of historical research in France, but also to offer interesting channels of enquiry to the scientific community of specialists in distant cultures. This community has often been reproached for working in a vacuum, for revelling in scholasticism, and for only bringing a very weak theoretical contribution to human and social sciences, and ultimately, very little response to its ethnocentric drifts.

In France, as Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard note, the organisation of research in non-European areas is above all based on groups of researchers divided into cultural areas – literally translated in certain cases by Nation States – within the framework of institutions such as the INALCO, EHESS, EFEO, and CNRS or in departments dedicated to eastern languages and civilisations within universities. On the one hand, this organisation has ensured the existence and continuity of teaching and research in distant areas that have been almost ignored by the disciplinary departments of universities. It has also been in a position to perpetuate the idea according to which the joint teaching of languages and civilisations was the *sine qua non* condition for the formation of true specialists in distant areas. And as Giorgio Riello points out, global history is not self-sufficient and supposes sharing work between specialists of very different cultural areas who have access to sources in vernacular languages and practitioners of great transversal themes, such as the history of work, or sciences and techniques. On the other hand, confining these distant areas into a handful of institutions

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<sup>13</sup> Pomeranz upholds that China and western Europe had comparable levels of development at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and thus sets out to re-examine the question of the reasons for which the industrial revolution took place in Europe rather than in China: Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Report coordinated by Dominique Darbon and Christophe Jaffrelot, *La recherche sur les aires régionales en sciences politiques: bilan et perspectives* (En ligne: [www.etudes-africaines.cnrs.fr/pdf/sciencepolitique.pdf](http://www.etudes-africaines.cnrs.fr/pdf/sciencepolitique.pdf)).

has exempted universities from any form of reflection about their actual place in human and social sciences in general.

### **The risk of Americo-centrism**

In the United States, it can be observed that the rise of World History has corresponded to a great decline in “Area Studies” that have inspired French cultural approaches. We might remember that Area Studies were created after the Second World War, as an attempt to know, analyse, and interpret cultures through a multi-disciplinary prism. They were also more political concerns involved, in particular the desire to develop knowledge about regions considered to be strategically placed in the Cold War. Radical criticism of Area Studies emerged, emblematic of which was Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1977. Said accused classical orientalists and Area Studies specialists of trying to reconstruct, through the notion of the East, or through geographical units such as the Middle East, the identity of foreign populations in such a way as to justify the domination of western powers<sup>15</sup>, Area Studies became one of the targets of “Post-Colonial Studies”, which accused them of serving colonial and imperialist interests. With the end of the Cold War, Area Studies increasingly lost importance as a political project. The analysis of globalisation will then tend to become a domain reserved for economics.

In the United States, within economic sciences, but also, to a certain extent, within political sciences, the domination of the postulate according to which all societies can be understood from the same interpretative framework, based on a specific fundamentalist conception of methodological individualism, has led to a decline in studies based on genuine work in the terrain. This decline in Area Studies is very worrying for the future and we might legitimately ask ourselves if, despite its undeniable contributions, a form of Global History that relies, in many works, on English sources is really in a position to pick up the baton. Thus, while the blockade in French institutions, as observed in the special issue of the *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, is undeniable and even useful to flag up, we should remain cautious as to how exemplary Anglo-Saxon global history is when it comes to making up for French universities’ shortfalls in the domain of the renewal of historiographical scale and in research into a less ethnocentric history. This is what Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard do when they write that “de-provincialising French historiography, and opening

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Said, *L’Orientalisme. L’Orient créé par l’Occident* (translated by Catherine Malamoud and prefaced by Tzvetan Todorov), Paris, Seuil, 1980 [new edition with a preface by the author (2003) published by Le Seuil in 2005].



windows to a vast world, does not mean slavishly following a model designed elsewhere” and, in reference to Pierre Bourdieu, they warn against “the pitfalls of symbolic legitimisation through cultural importation and the dangers of an internationalisation of research that would only be mere Americanisation”.

We have to avoid the remedy becoming worse than the illness, as it were. Furthermore we must not lose sight of the fact that France has produced its own debate on cultural areas. Thus in the issue of the *Annales* already cited earlier, Maurice Aymard extolled the merits of the Chinese historian R. Bin Wong who saw in Braudel’s *Méditerranée* a model of a “region” capable of serving as a basis for specialists of Asia in thinking about areas more fertile for research. Maurice Aymard rather mischievously remarked that while Braudel borrowed the virtues of interdisciplinarity in cultural areas from the United States for the 6<sup>th</sup> section of the EPHE, he did not apply such an analytic framework to the Mediterranean<sup>16</sup>. Finally, while French research has produced its own critique of cultural areas, it has also forged its own conception. This has been well illustrated by an energetic plea on the part of Yves Chevrier for whom “thinking about cultures and the study of cultures does not just mean thinking about different places [...], it means thinking about the world [...], a world that presents itself in its totality, including in its former Euro-western centre as a collection of cultural and historical areas [...]. The research on cultural areas appears as the very site where the most general issues of human science are formed”<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, the real challenge set by human and social sciences to a nation eager to become a genuine actor in the process of globalisation is possibly to be able to train specialists in cultural areas and global history who are genuinely capable of defining their subjects, but also capable of encountering non-western historiographies. Is it not here that lies our ability to shelve the old Eurocentric models and better grasp the world in the making today, the centre of gravity of which is undeniably shifting?

Translation from the French by Jonathan Sly

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice Aymard, “De la Méditerranée à l’Asie: une comparaison nécessaire”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, 56e année, n°1, janvier-février 2001, p. 43-50.

<sup>17</sup> Yves Chevrier, “Les aires culturelles dans les sciences de l’homme et de la société”, *Colloque Prospective*, 24-26 septembre 2003, ateliers thématiques, CNRS (département SHS), 5669.

### Further reading

- ▶ The *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* site on the Cairn portal: <http://www.cairn.info/...>
- ▶ The site of the World History Connected online review, with free-access articles: <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu/...>
- ▶ The review of David Landes' work, by Kenneth Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong on the World History Connected site: <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu/...>
- ▶ The review of *The Great Divergence* by Kenneth Pomeranz, by Peter C. Perdue (MIT) on the H-Net site: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/...>
- ▶ The Global Economic History Network site of the London School of Economics: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/...>
- ▶ The Warwick University Global History and Culture Centre site: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/...>
- ▶ The report by Dominique Darbon and Christophe Jaffrelot on the state of French political science research in Asia: [www.etudes-africaines.cnrs.fr/pdf/sciencepolitique.pdf](http://www.etudes-africaines.cnrs.fr/pdf/sciencepolitique.pdf) (pdf)

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