

Global History. Connected Histories or a History of Connections? Spring School

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What can global history do for us and what can we do for global history?

From 11th to 14th April 2011 the German Historical Institute in London hosted an academic event long-anticipated in research circles of global history: Jointly organized by scholars from Heidelberg University and the University of Leipzig, a Spring School with the thought-provoking title „Connected Histories or a History of Connections?“ was created as communication platform for the first generation trained in global history. The workshop gathered PhD-students in the middle of their research to discuss their approaches based on comparisons and connections; hence it not only served as ideal introduction to the Third European Congress on World and Global History, but also became a crucial interface between research and teaching.

In an attempt to distinguish between Connected Histories, where the connection provide the background for findings in order to shed new light on established narratives, and a History of Connections, where global connections become the primary research object (ROLAND WENZELHUEMER, Heidelberg), students and scholars alike were invited to sharpen their ideas of cross-cultural interactions. Hence, provoking questions and controversial statements on the differing prac-

tices and diverging opinions challenged our understanding of targets, duties and methods, as well as the future of global history. The high degree of trans-disciplinary works, a wide range of topics and the PhD-candidates' different positioning in the field further nourished in-depth discussions.

One recurring debate, initiated by ANTJE FLÜCHTER (Heidelberg) centred on traditional understandings of periodization and the search for an appropriate starting point of one global world. After lively discussions on revisiting the role of early modern connections that are traditionally underrepresented in global history, both early modernists and advocates of a meta-narrative of global history emphasised the sheer importance of pre-19th century-developments for our understanding of globality.

The need for a „cosmopolitan meta-narrative“ of global history intermingled with local elements as advocated by Patrick O'Brien became another central matter for debate. However it was interesting to note that the younger generation did not seem particularly worried about alarming tendencies in a period of strong dualism between persistent scholarly critique of lacking specialisation and global history's success as a widely recognized research perspective. It looked as if the majority of the students were more interested in determining methods and theories than revisiting problematic terms and concepts. Against this background, the question, whether we still need to re-define global history, arose. The commonly held view was that tapping the full potential of global history asked for accepting the multitude of approaches; only then it would be possible to abandon the intrinsic notion of ethno-centric boundaries.

Although all participants advocated for the concepts of global history, their approaches differed significantly depending on their academic background. In light of that it should not surprise us that questions about the ambivalent character of global history could not have been solved to everyone's satisfaction. What was most striking in this respect is that the discussions and debates hardly ever touched upon self-inquiries and self-evaluation that had concerned researchers of global his-

tory in the past. Yet this is not to argue that the „new“ generation is ignorant to the shortcomings of the developing discipline. In fact, they simply seemed eager to contribute to a global historical meta-narrative bit by bit by addressing their individual research questions. Hence one may argue in favour of an empirical turn within the research field that promises more monographs of a concrete study in years to come.

What the majority of their ambitious projects had in common was a highly empirical framework and often also a multilingual corpus of sources. In terms of concrete research interest social and political aspects of long-distance connections held centre stage while dry economic analyses were almost categorically avoided, a development that could be taken as a clear sign for a social, cultural, political turn in global history. Thus, the term ‘social history of globalization’ was coined. Projects, such as LISA HELLMAN’s (Stockholm) work on the social relations of the employees of the multiethnic Swedish East India Company in Canton and Macao suggest promising results in this regard. Combined with the methodological search for a global history from below, other research such as capacity building in educational politics for the scheduled caste in India (MONIKA MILOWSKA, Warsaw) or the emergence of a developing caste in Nepal (SARA ELMER, Zürich) made clear that a social history of the local level was indispensable for our understanding of the spread of global knowledge.

Other studies on shifts in the socioeconomic field proved stimulating for the conceptualization of the creation of globality. The categories discussed in this context included new zones of interaction and the role of global actors. ANIRBAN GHOSH (München) examined new identities of the India circus and raised the question of how to write a global history of these new actors and agencies. With regard to early modern actors and agencies the concept of neutral carriers in maritime trade environment appeared twice: Strikingly, they played a crucial role not only in America’s trade with India and China, as LISA STURM (Frankfurt an der Oder) argued but also existed in Manila due to the absence of foreign intermediaries in the Manila trade, as

illustrated by BIRGIT TREMML (Wien) in her work on the multi-layered early modern Manila market that challenges recent scholarship on port cities.

A further noticeable aspect was that contemporary topics made interesting implications for the future of writing global history. With impressive interdisciplinary strength, the research projects of BIRTE HERRMANN (Heidelberg) and NILS RIECKEN (Berlin) examined perception and historiography of globality in contemporary China, respectively Morocco. GERRIE SWART’s (Stellenbosch) presentation on the intercultural level of the African Union’s cooperative security discourse, showed an appealing approach in illustrating the growing importance of global norms in the construction of international security institutions.

Strictly speaking, a true global history approach dealing with connected histories or histories of connections was not traceable in all research agendas. Often it was rather a trans-national study with strong comparative foci. That was the case with research on the role of Swiss knowledge in the temperance movement in colonial Africa and Latin America (SOENKE BAUCK / FRANCESCO SPOERING, Zürich), and the global context of the anti-alcohol movement in Bulgaria by NIKOLAY KAMENOV (Berlin / Zürich). A study on the development of the insolvency law (LEA HEIMBECK, Frankfurt am Main) in Greece, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and Venezuela during the nineteenth century, as well as the mutual influence of Western European constitutional cultures (CHRISTINA REIMANN, Berlin). They all highlighted the phenomenon of a trans-national league active for problem solutions.

To sum up, four innovative fields of research were continuously addressed: (1) a social history of globalization, (2) globalized actors, (3) a global space (i.e. in port cities) and (4) re-visited time frames. As to methodological deepening, the question how to write a global history from below was raised. So far we may only say with some certainty that economic globalization as main focus for a final narrative in global history has lost ground. There can be no doubt that we will hear more about these changing research paradigms in

the near future. Responding to several students' express rejection of economic history SILKE STRICKRODT (London) warned with good reason against toning down important implications that arise from economic aspects for the study of global connections.

A further worthwhile outcome of the discussions, although theoretically still vague, centred on the assumption of a linear process of learning and/or dis-learning in global settings. Based on the question whether certain political, economic or social phenomena are rooted in the early modern era but were interrupted or forgotten, „disentanglement“ emerged as a tempting concept. Following the undisputable fact that global movements disappear, questions how connections and processes disentangle again in privileged places of cultural exchange will have to be addressed in future. Here it may be worthwhile to explore in a specific setting, why cultural skills rather got lost to the next generation instead of having been stored. One hypothetical answer is that they disentangled because they turned global, and were no longer just cross-cultural or trans-national.

Despite the euphoric atmosphere of the workshop, the PhD-candidates were reminded of pointless reinventions of approaches and advised to think twice before they label their findings as „different“ or „new“. In his final comments, ARNDT BRENDKE (Berne) sounded a note of caution about dead-end battles of the exclusiveness of a certain period, technique or movement in history. Instead, he suggested focusing on our most important ability as global historians, namely explaining long-durée developments. Hence, with some irony we could say that the – at times – desperate search for better theories and methods ended where we started from: the history of connections.

In discussing the difficulties of writing an integrative global history on all that happened, MATTHIAS MIDDELL (Leipzig) hinted at pitfalls of current projects in which everything is lumped together. Arguing against conceptually and empirically weak syntheses in global history, he encouraged future PhD-theses in the field to fill these gaps. As alternative approaches, he suggested addressing a manageable narrative – as argued by Michael Geyer

in a 1995 article in the *American Historical Review* or alternatively to look at concrete actors and their concrete intentions when connecting the world via social networks.

Taken as a whole this pilot project has major potential for the future. PhD-students in an advanced stage of their research have the chance to reflect on their projects and to solve nasty problems such as factual misunderstanding and theoretical uncertainties that often remain unspoken whilst doing research at their home institutions. My personal impression was that since the spring school like hardly any other academic gathering offered ample time for discussion it proved rewarding for participants and the research field alike. In light of that the organizers deserve praise for the initiative and their continuous endeavours for a constructive climate.

The event ended with a particularly illuminating representation of influential historical connections for the world as we know it today. An excursion to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich brought the participants into direct contact with inventions that led to a globalizing phenomenon beyond comparison: the Prime Meridian as the centre of world time.

Conference Overview:

Panel I (Mentor: Benedikt Stuchtey, London)

Sara Elmer (Zürich): The Making of a 'Development Caste': Visions and Agents of Development in Nepal (1920-1990)

Anjana Singh (London): Useful and Reliable Knowledge in Global Histories of Material Progress in the East and the West

Panel II (Mentor: Katja Naumann, Leipzig)

Birte Herrmann (Heidelberg): Transnational Influences on the Chinese Student Movement 1989

Monika Milowska (Warsaw): The Crucial Role of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in India

Panel III (Mentor: Andreas Gestrich, London)

Lisa Hellman (Stockholm): The Social Life and Practices in Canton and Macao during the Active Time of the Swedish East India Company

(1731–1813)

Birgit Tremml (Vienna): The Philippines and the Pacific Ocean: Interfaces for Intercultural Encounters in the Early Modern Era

Panel IV (Mentor: Ulrike Lindner, Bielefeld)

Gerrie Swart (Stellenbosch): The African Union Peace and Security Council's Construction of a Norm-Driven Cooperative Security Discourse

Nils Riecken (Berlin): Abdallah Laroui and the location of history. An intellectual biography

Panel V (Mentor: Corinne A. Pernet, St. Gallen)

Sönke Bauck/Francesco Spöring (Zürich): The Global Anti-Alcohol Movement, c. 1870-1940: Perspectives from Switzerland and South America

Nikolay Kamenov (Zürich/Berlin): Global Context/Local Application: Case study of the anti-alcohol movement in Bulgaria: 1890-1940

Panel VI (Mentor: Silke Strickrodt, London)

Anirban Ghosh (Munich): The Tropic Trapeze: Circus in Colonial India

Lisa Sturm (Frankfurt an der Oder): Global Networks, Urban Spaces: Merchants, India Goods and the Rise of Middling Classes in New York 1784-1812

Panel VII (Mentor: Scarlett Conelissen, Stellenbosch)

Christina Reimann (Berlin): Transnational Constitutional Culture in the Late 19th Century

Lea Heimbeck (Frankfurt am Main): Legal Institutionalization in International Insolvency Law: The Connection of Case Studies as Backbone for Legal Investigations

Comment and Closing discussion with Arndt Brendecke (Berne) and Matthias Middell (Leipzig)

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