Conference participants come in different types. Some sweep in, speak at one panel, and disappear again; others arrive early, attend a full panel in each session, and do not leave until the last speaker has gone home; and some pick and choose, flit between panels and meetings, and take in a few exhibitions at the same time. Some have come from far away places, others are more or less at home in the conference city; some are long-standing regulars at the conference, for others their attendance is a first. What matters are the opportunities the conference has to offer all the participants in bringing so many different scholars together. People meet, ideas are exchanged, deals are sealed, goods (mostly books) are bought and sold, and, of course, disagreements emerge as fast as they disappear again. Academic conferences are like the nodes of global trade in the old world, and if we look closely enough, we can see the patterns of past, present and future developments transpire in these nodes.

I offer these thoughts not by way of a comprehensive report on the proceedings of the entire conference, but as a personal reflection on the things I learned from these very stimulating days in Paris. Clearly, the field of world and global history has expanded tremendously in recent years, as testified by the large number of participants, panels, papers and special events that appeared on the programme. It is a great pleasure to see that scholarship characterised by such varied approaches, types, periods and topics can be conceived of as falling in the broad category of global history. What exactly global history is, however, remains a topic for debate and interpretation. It struck me on this occasion that despite the lack of agreement on what exactly global history is or should be, and despite this wide variety of approaches and interpretations, we continue to confront many of the same questions in our work.

Many of us ask ourselves exactly how wide the ‘global’ perspective is or should be. Is global history the history of the entire globe, or is global history also that history that asks about connections between different, and perhaps quite small parts of the world or even falling in the interstices of these wider connections? We ask what sources we can use to make our work global, regardless of our interpretation of the field, and often we find that our use of sources in the field of global history takes us outside of our comfort zones. One way or another, a global perspective means we have to venture into sets of source materials that are new or unfamiliar, and this raises questions about our approach to those sources. Another question I came across in a number of the papers concerns periodization. How do we find workable systems of periodization that facilitate our analyses without imposing the internal patterns of time and change of one place onto another, where different patterns are at work? Similarly, our methodological approaches might work for one place but not for another. Overall, however, we all share an interest in understanding the main agents that help us analyse the patterns of growth and decline, the successes and failures, the convergences and divergences across spaces and cultural zones that form the contexts of the diverse human experiences of the past.

We might share such general questions, but our answers take us into very different directions indeed. One the one hand, they take us in the direction of the major integrative frameworks. I learned a lot from the panel on world-systems theory led by Philippe Beaujard in honour of the global economic historian Philippe Norel who recently passed away, and from the paper entitled ‘Analysing Historical Integration’ led by scholars from Ghent working with large datasets to test the idea of the centre-periphery opposition based on world-systems theory. While large datasets and planet-wide analytical perspectives allow certain kinds of insights into large-scale patterns and models, it strikes me as important that the dimensions of local particularities and change over time at the local level are not lost.
The questions posed by capitalism (its definition, its place and time of origin, and its impact on cultural patterns) remain of paramount importance for many of us, not only for those of us who work in social science contexts, but also scholars working in humanities-based disciplines. The papers I heard in this area were more interested in varied repertoires of connections than in models, and in the people, ideas, technologies, and objects that shape those repertoires. They bring not only colours, flavours, fashions and sounds into the stories of connections, but also a wide variety of processes that make connections possible beyond trade: disseminations, copies, imitations, emulations, reimaginations, and so forth. Moreover, I was delighted to find an emphasis on the people and things that do not fit into larger patterns and structures: the marginal, the interstate, or ‘inter-imperiality’ as Laura Doyle called it. I am convinced we need both: the emphasis on the planet-wide structures, the patterns, the economic divergences and integrations, and the all-important issue of power, but also the absence of power, the inequalities, what is happening outside of the state purview.