

Global History, Global Debates

by Dominic Sachsenmaier

The Trans-Cultural Dimension of Global History

The surging interest in global and trans-cultural history is not only centered on the West. Also a comparatively large number of historians in East Asia, India, Latin America and other parts of the world have developed a proclivity towards trans-cultural perspectives. In most parts of the world there is a growing awareness that so far historiography has only insufficiently explored the history of inter-cultural connections, cross-regional exchanges and worldwide transformations. In many countries one can observe an intensifying debate over the parameters for new forms of world history, trans-cultural history and global history. In some cases, particularly in Germany, these debates still outweigh the amount of actual research produced in the new field.

There are many field designations for the effort to push the study of history beyond the nation state and single cultural experiences. In addition to „new world history“, „trans-cultural history“ and other terms, it is particularly the word „global history“ that has quickly risen to prominence. It is now used in many Western and non-Western languages – for example, the German „Globalgeschichte“ or the Chinese „quanqiushi“ increasingly appear in publication and project titles. Applying the catchword „global“ to the study of history has become popular for several reasons. Firstly, unlike the historically somewhat problematic term „world“, „globe“ does not smack of Hegelianism and Western-centrism. Secondly, in public discourse the word „global“ has come to symbolize dynamic structures such as the flows, exchanges, and mutual reactions between different world regions. Thirdly, in contrast to key words such as „international“ or „trans-national“, „global“ does not presuppose the nation state as a key unit of scholarly inquiry. The latter reasons reflects the growing feeling of uneasiness among historians that their own field is still operating mainly within national boundaries or single cultural realms. Indeed, in many research fields such as the study of diaspora communities, religions, and the spread

of ideologies (just to name a few) culturally constructed boundaries are far more important than political borders.

Even though the new interest in global history is a trans-cultural phenomenon in and of itself, the current debates tend to be locally specific and to remain confined to single national or regional arenas. In other words, the almost worldwide debate on global history is conditioned by local factors, which is why it can be understood as a „glocal“ phenomenon. No matter whether in Japan, the United States or China: the discussions on global and international history are influenced by distinctive historiographical traditions, departmental structures and the general intellectual climate. Needless to say, in all countries approaches to global history are characterized by a variety of co-existing or even competing schools. Yet there are certain core themes, research traditions and institutional settings that color the local debates and in that manner differentiate them from each other.

It is not without a certain irony that almost all over the world academic historiography has largely shied away from studying the past two centuries from trans-cultural perspectives. In other words, the history of the historically unprecedented global entanglements and interdependencies has hardly been written. This global neglect of global approaches is rooted in the local bias of historiography as a distinct disciplinary culture. In this context we should consider that nationally centered historiography with its primacy of detailed source work is itself the outcome of a global historical development. Arguably the origins of no other modern academic discipline are so closely tied to the program of the nation state as in the case of history. This is also true for most non-Western societies, where – usually as part of modernization programs – Western conceptions of history and the nation largely replaced earlier indigenous traditions. Today's Chinese historiography, for example, is more influenced by Western paradigms than by traditional ways of understanding the past.

In most countries the national and decidedly local heritage of historiography reflects itself in the structure of history departments. Al-

most all over the world historians tend to be experts in the history of single nation states or mono-cultural realms at best. No matter whether in China, Japan, the United States or in Germany, there are hardly any chairs in fields such as bi-cultural history, the history of cultural encounters or migrations. In a political situation and overall intellectual climate, in which issues related to globalization and cultural encounters have become increasingly important in academic and public discourse, this particularistic tradition has become particularly problematic.

Needless to say, the simultaneous interest in trans-cultural perspectives in many academic arenas cannot only be explained by common intellectual challenges and structural problems. Rather, the trans-cultural movement towards global history provides evidence for the growing international connectedness of the scholarly world. For example, the number of academic translations, international conferences and academic exchange programs has risen sharply during the past ten years. In addition, some prestigious research universities have become intellectual transaction hubs of global significance – agoras, in which ideas are exchanged and being appropriated to different cultural and disciplinary contexts.

As already mentioned, intellectual currents with a global impact on historiography are certainly not a new phenomenon. Still there are several factors that distinguish today's flows of concepts from the transmissions occurring before the 1930s, when intellectual boundaries were also rather permeable. In recent years the stream of academic trends seems to flow less clearly from West to East. For example, the Latin American dependency theories as well as Indian post-colonialism have profoundly influenced Western social sciences and even historiography – albeit to a lesser extent. In a sense the venue of academic exchanges has ceased to be a flow from a clearly definable source of origin. Rather the generation and adaptation of ideas has at least begun to turn into a multi-directional network of exchanges. The network character of newly emerging intellectual paradigms also

accounts for their rather synchronic emergence in different world regions. The understanding of „the West“ as the sole epicenter of most intellectual shockwaves does no longer express reality.

Ways of Doing Research in Global History

Ideally global history should encompass different local viewpoints and interpretations. Any multi-polar and global perspective on the past has to find ways to remain sensitive for the local. There is a rather wide agreement that the great master narratives of the past cannot serve as the intellectual fundament of global history because they at least implicitly assumed a growing homogenization or even Westernization of the modern world. Rather, more recent, pluralistic approaches such as concepts of „multiple modernities“ and „glocalization“ could serve as the intellectual frameworks for a new historiography at a global level.

The shift to multi-polar perspectives necessitates further intensive methodological debates on how to balance the gains of a global perspective with the potential losses in local sensitivity. Any historiographic research with a decidedly global perspective will have to be sensitive to both, the inner diversity of global structures and the global dimension of many local forces. But what historian would actually be able to conduct studies that are historically detailed, regionally sensitive and yet at the same time globally aware? Another myriad of edited volumes with single chapters shedding light on different regional experiences will not provide an answer. As has often been pointed out, such essay collections tend to reinforce a regional bias instead of integrating different regional experiences into a superordinate, trans-cultural vision. Merely amassing additional area perspectives will most certainly not internationalize historiography in any prolific way.

Among the main impediments to open historical research to trans-cultural themes are disciplinary value-systems and mentalities. Few historians are still involved in nation-building, but certain remnants of this tradition survive in historiography as an academic culture,

which has many commonalities in different parts of the world. Generally speaking historians distrust macro-level approaches and favor instead detailed work with a narrow scope. For this reason neither the so-called „philosophies of history“ by Arnold J. Toynbee or Oswald Spengler nor modernization theories or world-system analysis generated broad support among historians. Even social history with its rebellion against historicist mentalities did not truly reach the spatial confinements of earlier historical research.

Faced with the dual necessity of widening its scope and of keeping its commitment to solid source work, historiography finds itself in a gridlock. One way to retain the tradition of detailed analysis while exploring global fields of inquiry is to work in teams. However, genuine teamwork is still highly unusual in historiography and even in the social sciences in general. If we want to produce at least some accounts that seek to understand worldwide constellations and processes, we should try to experiment with group authorship. It is possible to imagine different area experts jointly developing a shared set of questions and a common methodological framework.

Negotiated methodologies may lead to promising new insights, particularly since different regional studies still apply rather divergent methodologies to related historical phenomena. For example, historians of Europe and East Asia tend to apply different sets of questions to 20th-century transformations of political cultures in both world regions. However, both in Europe and East Asia certain developments such as the advent of mass media, mass mobilization, and political radicalism were indeed related to similar structural transformations and influences. Methodological multiperspectivities can thus produce more than a pluralistic framework for a global historical analysis—it can lead to cross-fertilizations between area-specific research approaches as well as national or regional research traditions. Such studies provide an important bridge between the disparate disciplines of historical comparison and the historiography of inter-cultural relations, transfers, or encounters. They embed detailed analyses of a

limited number of cases into a larger, global perspective.

Certainly the study of global processes blurs previously established academic boundaries, and many projects with a global scope will be interdisciplinary in nature. However, different academic fields are likely to retain some disciplinary cultures, and historiography can certainly add its own elements to the rapidly expanding study of global flows and structures in the widest sense. Historiography can contribute a narrative tradition, which tends to be filled with less academic jargon and rigid theoretical frameworks. And it can provide meticulous source work and appreciation of local details. Without due attention to local levels of experiences we will only gain a rather superficial understanding of global dynamics and trans-cultural constellations.