

Global Social History: Class and Social Transformation in World History

Veranstalter: Christof Dejung, Universität Bern; David Motadel, London School of Economics and Political Science

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From 29 to 30 August 2019, a group of emerging and established scholars gathered at the London School of Economics and Political Science to reflect on the theme of 'Global Social History: Class and Social Transformation in World History'. The conference sought to explore the possibilities and limits of 'global social history', a subfield still in the making, owing in part to the decline of social history during the global turn of the 1990s. A previous conference, held at the University of Cambridge in 2015, had approached this same subject by focusing on 'The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Class in the Age of Empire'¹; the present workshop represented a continuation and widening of this effort.

In their introductory remarks, the organizers, CHRISTOF DEJUNG (Bern) and DAVID MOTADEL (LSE) identified five potential areas for further reflection on global social history: (i) addressing how to compare social groups, such as aristocracies, in different parts of the world, while at the same time avoiding Eurocentrism or undue generalization; (ii) exploring the global entanglements of particular social groups, to show how, for instance, the middle class was either created by globalization or itself promoted it; (iii) incorporating not only class but also race and gender into the analysis, through intersectional approaches; (iv) evaluating the significance of the *Sattelzeit* or turn of the 19th century, by engaging critically with concepts such as Pomeranz's 'great divergence' or Polanyi's 'great transformation'; and (v) considering whether global social history requires a spatial equivalent to the role of the nation-state in conventional histories, be it certain global structures, systems, or logics, and how this could be reconciled with the insights of post-colonial theory.

The conference then continued with its first panel, on 'Global Interaction, Imperialism and Social Order'. MERRY E. WIESNER-HANKS (Wisconsin) reflected on how intersectionality – the insight that all social hierarchies are interwoven and reinforcing – could help us understand how certain social formations came about. Focusing especially on the Spanish and Portuguese colonial settings in the early Americas, she showed how colonized people shaped social hierarchies from the bottom up by using one form of hierarchy (such as family status) to circumvent or subvert another. Wiesner-Hanks welcomed how class had recently begun receiving as much attention within studies of intersectionality as race and gender, while noting that there remained an excessive focus on the global North. ANDREW SARTORI (New York) traced how early twentieth-century Bengali agrarian actors came to articulate a vision of themselves as social beings, as a case study of how transformative concepts such as 'sociality', with its European roots, were appropriated beyond elite colonial spaces. These uses could constitute a strategic and contingent means to pursue a diverse range of claims against the state, but they could also form the normative principle upon which specific demands and aspirations were constructed. Sartori argued that such a global history of the concept of 'the social' could serve as a point of entry into histories of emergent forms of sociability that are responsive to the practices of abstract interdependence characteristic of capitalist society.

The second panel addressed 'World Markets and Social Stratification'. CHRISTOF DEJUNG (Bern) explored the relationship between mercantile networks and the state as a vital part of the wider relationship between capitalism and imperialism. Such mercantile networks, he argued, benefited from the protection such as that provided by the British Navy, but they could also oppose the aims of imperial bureaucracies, and should thus not

¹ An edited volume based on this conference has just appeared: Christof Dejung / David Motadel / Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire*, Princeton 2019. The conference report can be found here: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6189> (30.10.2019).

be seen only as mere accessories to empire. Dejung showed how on the one hand, mercantile elites could be interpreted as a class in themselves, with its own form of sociability, but on the other hand, structural differences existed between them, in terms of their position in the world economy, thus highlighting how a macro-historical approach needed to mediate the tension between comparison and attention to specificity. MICHAEL GOEBEL (Graduate Institute Geneva) approached the conference's theme through urban history, situating this in a triangular relationship with global and social history. Goebel argued that while urban history, like social history, had in the 1990s suffered from its association with modernization theory, methodological nationalism, and Eurocentrism, as well as fragmentation into micro-studies with a heavy North Atlantic bias, cities represented particularly promising locales for studying global social history, because they universally combined density and social differentiation. Focusing on fast-growing turn-of-the-century commodity entrepôts such as Buenos Aires, Havana, Manila, and Singapore, Goebel highlighted how class formation and global trade interacted.

In the conference's first keynote, GEORGE LAWSON (LSE) gave an overview of the field of global historical sociology and its relevance to global social history. Lawson defined global historical sociology as the study of two interrelated processes: the transnational and global dynamics that enable the emergence, reproduction and breakdown of social orders, and the historical emergence, reproduction and breakdowns of transnational and global social forms. While this overlapped with global history, Lawson observed that the latter had not sufficiently theorized transboundary interactions, linked the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, or identified the role of power asymmetries in directing global connections and flows. In his view, a shared agenda could be articulated as a project of writing non-Eurocentric histories of transboundary entanglements that focus on how these entanglements are patterned through power asymmetries.

The second day started with the second keynote, by MIKE SAVAGE (LSE), who spoke

on the development of concepts of class, ethnicity, and gender in historical analysis. Whereas key to earlier modernity was the routine production and reproduction of historical differences based on race, gender, or class, the subsequent emergence of individualized identities had been accompanied by a relativization of categories, such as poverty as a relative state. This relativizing categorical turn had allowed for significant achievements, for example by cross-fertilizing scholarship with the work of radical social movements, while paradoxically shoring up categorical analysis at the very same time that its ontological basis was undergoing major critique. More recently, however, categorical analysis was faced with a number of challenges, including a proliferation of categorical inequalities, leading to its fragmentation.

The conference then continued with its third panel, on 'Monarchies of the World'. JEROEN DUINDAM (Leiden) spoke on the subject of ruling houses in the *Sattelzeit*, laying out his approach to a global social history of rulership along three axes: divergence, commensurability, and convergence. As an important example of divergence, he emphasized the impact of matrilineal as opposed to patrilineal succession, which rather than concentrating power created a circulation of power and wealth. At the same time, Duindam argued that rather than focusing on superficial differences, historians ought to identify structural equivalences between different groups of aristocrats, in order to answer the overarching question of whether there existed a global aristocracy before the modern age. DAVID MOTADEL (LSE) spoke about encounters between Western and non-Western monarchs, which offered the latter the opportunity to enter into the European-dominated system of international society, while remaining conditioned by European standards of civilization, which were tied closely to legitimacy and territoriality. Motadel argued that we should not understand such 'inter-cultural' encounters as simply a one-way diffusion from Europe to non-European peripheries, since monarchical practices were fluid, differed across Europe, and evolved in contact with non-European courts, leading to convergence. At the same time, power differentials

meant that there was adaptation involved on the side of the non-European monarchs, who had to adjust to unfamiliar customs and languages, and were reliant on European monarchs to be invited.

The workshop's fourth panel dealt with 'Capitalism and Global Labour'. MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN (Amsterdam) discussed the concept of relational inequality within the global working class, asking if and how workers in the global North profited from those in the global South. He distinguished between two forms of profit, the latter far more important than the former: direct and indirect, the latter meaning that Northern workers had more or better jobs or enjoyed greater purchasing power because of how capitalist enterprises operated in the global South. Van der Linden laid out a research agenda for the study of this subject across different periods, hypothesizing that workers in the global North mainly profited from the exploitation of workers in the South through cheap commodities and additional job opportunities. Investigating the sources of xenophobic outbursts, LEO LUCASSEN (Leiden) placed the relationship between labor, immigration, and xenophobia in global perspective. Analyzing the case of Burma in the 1930s – chosen to challenge the often Atlantic-centric perspective that privileges xenophobia as a predominantly Western phenomenon, linked to modernization and industrialization – Lucassen argued that the perception of migrants crowding out or unfairly competing with native workers did not suffice as an explanation. Rather, he emphasized the importance of their stigmatization in racist, social and religious terms, and the agency of xenophobic actors in building up the toxic ideological mixture that enabled the outbreak of violence.

The conference's fifth and final panel focused on 'Subalterns and Tribal Societies'. FRANCESCA FUOLI (Bern) related the ubiquitous and almost simultaneous emergence of banditry in the 19th century, specifically in the context of trans-border mountain ranges, to global dynamics such as the nationalization of territory. She argued that as states began to exercise new forms of territoriality, which included the forging of national identities, state- and empire-building, and anticolonial strug-

gle, the existence of mountain people raised questions of citizenship, and banditry was no longer tolerated. Raising questions for future research, Fuoli asked whether bandits could be understood as a class, and how changing economic relations and different ideas of sociality impacted banditry. Speaking on tribal societies, ELISABETH LEAKE (Leeds) provocatively suggested that in many ways, the tribal could not be separated from the global, because of the concept's genesis in European expansionism from early modernity on. She offered a genealogy of its changing use over time, and noted that this history had consequences for how tribal members were able to act, for instance in relation to colonial states or in renegotiations of their status in newly emergent states. Leake argued that the fluidity of the term, the essentialist assumptions of much anthropological research, and a scarcity of sources presented methodological challenges as to how to study tribal communities and to bring these subaltern actors into global history.

In the workshop's concluding discussion, RICHARD DRAYTON (King's College London) reflected on the themes animating the workshop. He stressed the fluidity and relational nature of concepts such as class, race and gender, which were subject to continual (re)negotiation and therefore themselves constituted sites of contestation. In his view, one of the tasks of global social history was to trace the construction of these concepts in many places at the same time. Likewise, global social history should take into account the modes of (self-)perception of social relationships, such as languages of civilization. Finally, Drayton noted the challenge of combining connective and comparative histories in order to explain the global convergence of social forms. Bringing these aspects together, he saw in the present moment an opportunity to develop a dynamic, relational, and multi-temporal global social history. These remarks touched on questions that had recurred throughout the conference's discussions. Participants noted the challenge inherent in applying analytical concepts globally while at the same time using them reflexively and investigating their historically specific origins and meaning. Furthermore, connections be-

tween the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis remained to be theorized and structured more fully. Finally, while the conference's emphasis had been on class as the central category of social history, other categories, especially race and gender, continually broadened its scope, inviting calls for intersectional analysis that required further working out in practice. The workshop's discussions confirmed the productivity of working through such questions, and demonstrated the value of global social history in enabling a new focus on the establishment of, interaction between, and comparison of social groups across different areas.

Conference overview:

Introduction:

Christof Dejung (Bern) / David Motadel (LSE)

Panel 1: Global Interaction, Imperialism and Social Order

Chair: Christof Dejung (Bern)

Andrew Sartori (New York): 'Society' as a Space of Norms in a Colonial Context

Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Wisconsin): Intersectional Analysis and the History of Globalization

Panel 2: World Markets and Social Stratification

Chair: Francesca Fuoli (Bern)

Christof Dejung (Bern): Spinning the Wheels of Commerce: Mercantile Elites and the Making of Global Markets

Michael Goebel (Graduate Institute Geneva): Density and Differentiation: Cities in Global Social History

Keynote 1

George Lawson (LSE): A Global Historical Sociology of Class Formation

Keynote 2

Mike Savage (LSE): The Rise and Fall of the Social Group: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in Historical Perspective

Panel 3: Monarchies of the World

Chair: Margot Finn (UCL)

Jeroen Duindam (Leiden): Ruling Houses in

the *Sattelzeit*: Europe and the World

David Motadel (LSE): The Global Aristocracy: Royal Encounters in the Age of Empire

Panel 4: Capitalism and Global Labour

Chair: Martin Bayly (LSE)

Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam): Relational Inequalities within the World Working-Class, 1800-Present. Preliminary Reflections

Leo Lucassen (Leiden): Labour, Immigration and Xenophobia: A Global History

Panel 5: Subalterns and Tribal Societies

Chair: David Motadel (LSE)

Francesca Fuoli (Bern): Mountain People, Banditry and the Global Subalterns

Elisabeth Leake (Leeds): Tribal Societies in Global History

Concluding Discussion

Commentary: Richard Drayton (King's College London)

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