

Ferguson, Niall; Maier, Charles; Manela, Erez; Sargent, Daniel (Hrsg.): *The Shock of the Global. The 1970s in Perspective*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0674-04904-8; 434 S.

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Reviewing the newly emerging edited and introductory volumes on the 1970s or, for that matter, the older ones on the 1960s and the 1950s, one cannot help but wonder why so many historians feel the urge to think in decades. The decadological approach, which is particularly dominant in contemporary history, creates artificial problems (e.g. to determine the specific character or atmosphere of the decade) and, more importantly, precludes thorough analyses of historical developments and historiographical problems which do not follow our arbitrary divisions of time. The decadological approach can produce important insights to the extent that decades were meaningful for contemporaries as rhetorical devices to separate their present from earlier times. „The Shock of the Global,” emerging from a conference at the Weatherhead Center on „The Global 1970s” and edited by a group of Harvard historians, however, only rarely scrutinizes this dimension. Rather it tries to determine the special character of „the 1970s in perspective” – whatever that may mean. A theoretical, spatial or temporal perspective? We are left wondering.

In his introduction, „Crisis, What Crisis”, Niall Ferguson reflects the arbitrariness of the decadological approach and, as historiographical problems do not neatly come in decades, offers the solution to speak of the „long 1970s”. We have had the long 1950s and the long 1960s, now we have the long 1970s and soon a historian will suggest speaking of the long 1980s. What is this supposed to mean? Which historiographical issues and concerns can this concept help to explain? This is artificial historians’ speak that generates research questions where lack of time or imagination fail to determine more important historiographical problems that seem relevant outside the historian’s frame of mind as well. Ferguson himself then continues to ar-

gue that the 1970s were actually better than their reputation – at least according to most economic and political indicators better than the 1980s – and experienced as a crisis only in contrast to the preceding „swinging 1960s”. Ferguson even suggests that Anglophone academics were responsible for wrongly labeling the decade as a crisis because they were particularly affected by the inflation. Historical justice has been restored – the decade will be grateful.

To point out the general problems of a decadological approach is not to say that the volume does not contain many interesting and well-argued articles. It inevitably does, as most of its twenty-three generally rather short essays have been written by excellent historians who are eminent experts in their fields. Yet, forcing them to think about „the global 1970s” or the „shock of the global” and „the 1970s in perspective” distorts their research designs and forces them to think in a narrow time-frame that does not follow the inner logic of the themes they investigate. As the 1970s are not a research topic, but only a time frame within which multiple research designs can be developed, the volume necessarily lacks coherence: there are no guiding research questions, the reader does not learn how and why the essays were chosen and grouped into five sections: „Into an Emerging Order”, „Stagflation and the Economic Origins of Globalization”, „International Relations in an Age of Upheaval”, „Global Challenges and International Society”, „Ideological, Religious, and Intellectual Upheaval”. Therefore, the volume invites the easy criticism, as put forward by William I. Hitchcock, that a lot of what was important in the 1970s is missing or at least significantly underrepresented: the Cold War is hardly mentioned and the détente central only in Francis Gavin’s article on nuclear weapons; there is a lot of talk about structures, people only rarely appear; oil, energy and the Middle East are mentioned in some essays but not thoroughly scrutinized; and the „rest of the West”, Western Europe, and Japan are almost completely absent.¹

¹ H-Diplo-Roundtable Review, vol. XI, No. 49 (19.11.2010), <<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XI-49.pdf>>.

The last point leads to a more thorough criticism that has been formulated by Will Gray: if the volume has a common theme, it is globality but which conception of globality does it present? Without even reflecting on the limits of their vantage points, many articles, as Gray points out, follow an approach of „the United States and the rest of the world“ rather than trying to assume an international, let alone global perspective – most explicitly: Daniel Sargent on „The United States and Globalization“, Louis Hyman on „American Debt and Global Capital“, Vernie Oliveiro on „The United States and Multinational Enterprises“, Jeremi Suri on „Henry Kissinger and the Geopolitics of Globalization“, and Mark Atwood Lawrence on „The United States and the Developing World“.² Other articles focus on other areas of the world such as the Soviet Bloc (Stephen Kotkin), China (Odd Arne Westad), or Latin America (Jeremy Adelman). While all of them try to take new global forces and interdependencies into account, most interesting are the articles that actually try to address the transformations of globality and the international order itself.

On the one hand, these are the articles on economic globalization and its consequences for national governments. Charles Maier discerns a „crisis of industrial society“; Daniel Sargent simply follows contemporary political scientists in diagnosing an intensified global interdependence and an accordingly diminished influence of the United States; Alan M. Taylor attempts to calculate the intensification of globalization; and Vernie Oliveiro analyzes the importance of multinational corporations and their relation to the nation-state. On the other hand, four essays examine the transformation of the international order through the emergence or rising importance of non-governmental, transnational actors – also a favorite topic of contemporary political observers. Glenda Sluga suggests that within the UN a new conception of globality emerged; Michael Cotey Morgan examines the role of NGOs for the „Rebirth of Human Rights“; Erez Manela looks at the eradication of smallpox as a case for the „rise of global governance“; and J.R. McNeill offers an unsurprising overview over „environmentalism and international society.“ In some of the

papers a clearer distinction between historical developments, their contemporary reflections by political scientists or economists, and our historical assessments would have been fruitful as some authors tend to reiterate contemporary assessments as historiographical theses.

As it appears, the editors were less interested in the articles loosely grouped together in the last section on „Ideological, Religious, and Intellectual Upheaval“ dealing with women, rock music, religion, and the future. While the articles on religion (Andrew Preston on the Christian Right and Ayesha Jalal on Islam’s contemporary globalization) are useful as informative, introductory overviews, the others are far less convincing. It is a mystery why the editors included an article on popular music in the 1970s that does not even mention the two new musical developments that actually emerged in the decade, namely punk and disco. Rebecca Sheehan’s article on rock goes back to the 1960s and is full of conventional wisdom on the connection between rock and sexual liberation. Even more perplexing, however, is Matthew Connelly’s article on „Future Shock. The End of the World as They Knew It“ which purports that „people became more preoccupied with the future in the 1970s“ and wants to explain why this was the case. In exploring this question, however, Connelly neglects the extensive and elaborated literature on the history of the future by historians (e.g. Reinhart Koselleck) and sociologists of time (e.g. Helga Nowotny) that might have sharpened his conceptual tools. Moreover, he does not even come close to establishing any claim about a specific mode or intensity of the discourse about the future in the 1970s but provides only impressionistic and eclectic observations on texts that dealt with the future and were published in the 1970s.

Even if one accepts the decadological approach as a fruitful research framework, the volume neither offers coherent theses nor does it discuss the different assessments explicitly. Were economic globalization and global interdependency the most important new developments of a period that narrowly

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² Ibid.

circumscribed the sovereignty of the nation-state (Sargent, Alan M. Taylor)? Or was it rather a period of the reassertion of state sovereignty (Adelman, Oliveira)? Neglecting each other's work, many authors (over-) emphasize the importance of their research topics tending towards the use of superlatives. Is Kissinger really „the most controversial figure from the 1970s“, as it seems to Jeremi Suri who has spent years working on Kissinger? We are left wondering what was „most important“ in the 1970s: Deng's visit to the United States (Ferguson, p. 20), the oil crisis (Sargent, pp. 49f., Kotkin, p.80), the economic crisis (Talyor, p.97), the Vietnam War (Nguyen, p.159), nuclear parity with the Soviet Union (Gavin, p.189), or the transformation from an international to a world or global society (Sluga, Manela)? This is, of course an artificial question that only derives from the decadological research design. Yet, especially the last aspect of a transformed international or global order might have provided fruitful guiding questions that could have helped to structure a more coherent volume than „The Shock of the Global“ turned out to be. We can and should continue to ask how certain historical parameters developed in the 1970s but to start the research process by asking questions about „the 1970s“ seems to lead astray.

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