

JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL

GLOBAL HISTORY 2020: FRAGILITY IN STABILITY

ESTRATTO

da

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III
2020



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La scomparsa di Enrico Decleva il 19 marzo 2020, proprio mentre stava per andare in composizione questo volume dei *Balzan Papers*, è stata per tutti noi molto dolorosa. Presidente della Fondazione Balzan Premio di Milano, Consigliere della Fondazione Balzan Fondo di Zurigo e membro del Comitato di direzione di questa collana, Enrico è stato – *inter alia* – l’ideatore dei *Balzan Papers* e vorremmo che questo e i successivi volumi della “sua” collana preservassero, nel tempo delle memorie, l’impronta della sua intelligenza e della sua passione.

Salvatore Veca

The passing of Enrico Decleva on 19 March 2020, just as this volume of the *Balzan Papers* was going to press, was very painful for all of us. President of the Balzan Foundation – Prize in Milan, Member of the Board of the Balzan Foundation – Fund in Zurich, and a member of the Editorial Board of the *Balzan Papers*, Enrico – *inter alia* – had the initial idea for the publication, and we sincerely hope that this volume as well as those to come in “his” series will bear the mark of his great intellect and passion, and keep it alive in the time of memory.

Salvatore Veca



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JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL★

GLOBAL HISTORY 2020: FRAGILITY IN STABILITY

Speaking to a mixed audience of scholars from the full range of disciplines, an audience where historians are in a small minority and global historians form a sub-minority within that minority, I want to make a few fairly general points about the current situation of global history as a field of study. I am not going to give an advertising speech and tell you that global history is the most exciting, the most relevant and the most sophisticated type of historiography practiced today. What we need is a realistic assessment. My weighing of pros and cons has perforce to be highly subjective and cannot do justice to the wealth of activities by global historians across the planet.¹ There are already attempts underway to turn the rise of global history into a subject for historians of historiography.² But it is too early for results of broad surveys to be published; many of them will be confined to a single country anyway.³

Let me first explain the title of this lecture: *fragility in stability*. «Stability» means that global history is here to stay. It has proved to be more than an ephemeral fashion and has definitely established itself as one among many sub-disciplines in historical studies. Yet, while some enthusiasts are dizzy with success and even dream of discursive dominance, it has to be admitted that success has stopped short of triumph. It is a fragile and vulnerable kind of success.⁴

★ 2018 Balzan Prizewinner for Global History; inaugural lecture of the academic year 2019/2020, Balzan-FRIAS Project in Global History at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), 21 October 2019.

¹ BECKERT – SACHSENMAIER 2018; MIDDELL 2019; SACHSENMAIER 2011.

² See the report on a conference that took place in May 2019 at the Historisches Kolleg, Munich: <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8345>; a good introduction is IRIYE 2013, esp. pp. 1-18.

³ See, for example, on the special path of the United States: GOEDDE 2018.

⁴ The present lecture joins a debate that was initiated by ADELMAN 2017 with a critical comment on global history, to which DRAYTON – MOTADEL 2018 responded in a surprisingly defensive mode.

There is now an almost general consensus within the historical profession that global perspectives are legitimate and that global history is more than a playground for megalomaniac amateurs.⁵ But only a tiny minority among historians actually practices it. The small number of specialized professorships for global history – there are hardly any positions for «world» history, at least not in European countries – is growing slowly, if at all. And global history cannot rest confidently on intellectual foundations solid enough to answer all of the most common methodological challenges. For too long it has felt in cosy harmony with the *Zeitgeist* and has relied on the all-too-obvious premise that a global age cries out for globalized historical studies. Such complacency, however, makes global history vulnerable to critique even by well-meaning sympathizers from outside the field. There is a lot of fragility lurking behind the facade of stability.

The current uneasiness, perhaps amounting to a «crisis», is difficult to understand without a brief glance at the origins of global history.⁶ Global history emerged around the year 2000 in the United States and Britain, with the Netherlands, Germany, Japan and Australia trailing behind with only a slight delay. A solitary forerunner in France – someone who rarely spoke of «l’histoire mondiale» – was the great Fernand Braudel with his trilogy *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*, published in 1979 and translated into English in the early 1980s.⁷

Here are a few chronological landmarks in the rapid career of global history:

- 1993 – the first pioneering collection of articles on general problems of global history, truly an early bird and still worth reading;⁸
- 1996 – the foundation of the *Journal of World History*, based at the University of Hawaii, followed in 2006 by the *Journal of Global History*, published by Cambridge University Press;
- 2000 – the pathbreaking book *The Great Divergence*, by Kenneth Pomeranz, an American economic historian of China, hotly debated to this day and perhaps the most influential book in global history ever written;⁹

⁵ Recent overviews are: OSTERHAMMEL 2018; SACHSENMAIER 2019; for a lively introduction to the field see WENZLHUEMER 2017.

⁶ «World history» has a different pedigree. On the origins of «modern» world history writing see NAUMANN 2018. The entire tradition since antiquity is surveyed in the huge work INGLEBERT 2014; see also KUNZE 2017.

⁷ BRAUDEL 1981-84; on Braudel in context see RAPHAEL 2003, pp. 162-70.

⁸ MAZLISH – BUULTJENS 1993.

⁹ POMERANZ 2000.

- 2000 – in Germany, the inauguration of a *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte*, strongly influenced by Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory;¹⁰
- 2001 – my own programmatic book *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats*, certainly not an international landmark but in my own country, Germany, a symptomatic publication, in effect anticipating what shortly after came to be known as «global history» but still cautiously avoiding that grandiloquent term;¹¹
- 2004 – the first analytically sophisticated and entirely non-Eurocentric portrait of a particular age: *The Birth of the Modern World, 1789-1914* by Christopher Bayly, an eminent historian of modern India, based in Cambridge;¹²
- 2004 – a decision by the German Max Planck Society to re-dedicate its venerable Max Planck Institute for History in Göttingen to global history, a signal change of priorities that ultimately led away from habitual Eurocentrism to the establishment of an institute for the study of religious and ethnic diversity;¹³
- 2007 – the start of a first series of monographs in Germany under the title «Globalgeschichte», which by the end of 2019 had grown to 33 published volumes.¹⁴

In Germany, where I know the situation best, global history became a relevant factor in academic historiography around 2005. In other words, it is barely fifteen years old. The situation is similar in other countries on the European continent with the possible exception of the Netherlands, where a strong tradition of colonial studies offered a basis for an early and smooth expansion of a global scope. In the United States and the United Kingdom, global history took off about a decade earlier than in continental Europe, becoming paradigmatic for developments elsewhere. Even so, global history is a young field in a double sense: because it arose in the present century, and also because it is nowadays peopled mostly by scholars in their forties or younger.

In its initial phase, global history was based on a number of good ideas. Five of them are particularly important and of enduring interest.

¹⁰ The founder of the journal was a specialist on East European history: Hans-Heinrich Nolte, today the doyen of world history in Germany.

¹¹ OSTERHAMMEL 2001.

¹² BAYLY 2004. An earlier book with the same title was JOHNSON 1991, a still interesting *tour du monde* for the years 1815 to 1830, but without Bayly's theoretical aspirations.

¹³ <https://www.mmg.mpg.de/home> [accessed 6 December 2019].

¹⁴ The programmatic opening volume was CONRAD – ECKERT – FREITAG 2007, followed by a kind of companion piece with a different publisher: BUDDE – CONRAD – JANZ 2006.

(1) In the 1990s, globalization replaced modernization as the master concept of the social sciences.¹⁵ Modernization had been the guiding concept behind the rise of a non-Marxist social history in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s it fell out of fashion, along with modernization theory as a sociological paradigm. With very few exceptions, the leading theorists of globalization who stepped into the limelight after 1990 cared very little for the past. But current globalization certainly did not appear out of the blue with the sudden rise of the Internet and the collapse of the Soviet bloc. It must have had a history. Global history provided clues as to when and how current globality came about.¹⁶ Historians jumped on the bandwagon of a new mega-trend.

(2) Issues of obvious concern for humanity as a whole reappeared on the political agenda after the end of the Cold War: the need for a new world order in politics and economics, often discussed under the new label of «global governance»; human rights, their codification in international law and their promotion by activist organizations operating globally; migration, its causes and its effects on host societies, and so on. Even climate change appeared on the public horizon as early as the 1990s. Ozone depletion became a big topic in that decade, while individual experts had voiced concern over man-made atmospheric change already much earlier. Given these new foci of public attention, there was a strong incentive for historians to look beyond the nation-state as the natural framework for historical analysis. «Transnational history» became an exciting new project before it was overtaken by more ambitious programmes of global history.¹⁷ Both shared the assumption that nations and nation-states did not evolve from internal dynamics alone, but were impacted by a wide variety of external factors.

(3) In 1993, the famous political scientist Samuel P. Huntington cast doubt on the post-Cold War expectations of a peaceful integration of the world, likely on Western terms.¹⁸ Opposing messianic hopes in an «end of history», Huntington predicted violent clashes between a handful of great civilizations, with Islam as the chief villain in the game. Global studies scholars and some historians felt doubly provoked: first, by Huntington's lack of trust in global governance and the benevolent effects of global networks of economics and communication; and second, by his resuscitation

¹⁵ OSTERHAMMEL 2015.

¹⁶ OSTERHAMMEL – PETERSSON 2005 (updated German edition: OSTERHAMMEL – PETERSSON 2019).

¹⁷ SAUNIER 2013.

¹⁸ HUNTINGTON 1993.

of the old concept of «civilization» that had for a long time been the backbone of world-history writing. Influenced by social constructivism and its critique of essentializing «the Other», some historians took strong exception to the macro-category of «civilization». They wanted to devise a kind of comprehensive history-writing that left behind conventional brands of «world» history where the concept of civilization had the same «container» effect as «the nation» in national history. Global history was predicated on a dual rejection of «nation» *and* «civilization». It must be added, though, that in practice much of current global history is less ambitious and focuses on a re-contextualization of national histories.¹⁹

(4) Almost invisible from the citadels of mainstream history, there had occurred, since the 1960s, an explosion of research on all parts of the world outside Europe and North America-research that was, ironically, conducted mostly in the academic centers of the wealthy North: in Paris or London, Heidelberg or Chicago. This huge amount of knowledge, gained through state-of-the-art historiography, was made widely available when in the late 1970s Cambridge University Press began to publish its multivolume histories of world regions that synthesized thousands of monographs and articles from around the world – a veritable tip of an iceberg of research.²⁰ By about 2000, there were tens of thousands of pages of absolutely first-rate scholarship waiting to be used for comparison and for developing broader pictures in the spirit of Braudel and his equally eminent British colleague Eric J. Hobsbawm, another pioneer of placing Europe in wider contexts. Global history is built on much stronger empirical foundations than the older world history ever was.

(5) After the end of decolonization – the fall of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 can be seen as its final act – there was a perceived need and chance to strengthen the world-wide ecumene of historians. Up to then, the First World and the Third World had only come together in imperial and colonial history. Even though this kind of history was no longer written in a pro-imperial and apologetic mode, it remained an endless collection of stories of perpetrators and victims. Global history, where empires and colonialism continue to be a very important sub-field, held up the prospect of a more egalitarian dialogue between historians from all parts of the world. Under global history auspices, Africans, for example, were no longer expected just to tell tales of suffering and suppressed identity in

¹⁹ This happens in huge collective volumes such as BOUCHERON 2017 as well as in tightly argued articles, e.g. LUENGO – DALMAU 2018.

²⁰ See an up-to-date list at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/what-we-publish/collections/cambridge-histories>.

their own continent. The old hierarchy where Westerners were in charge of the general, and the Others were reduced to re-enacting their own particularity, came apart. Flattening all barriers of ethnocentrism, orientalism, and exoticism was a strong and almost utopian inspiration behind the first flowering of global history around the turn of the millennium. It involved the expectation that in a massive reversal of perspectives, non-Eurocentric takes on world history would gain equal acceptance, and that such histories would be written from a variety of novel vantage points.²¹

These are some of the elements that defined the pristine «globalist moment» of the 1990s, in other words, a major effort to find a new relevance for historical studies at a time when their prominent place in academia and the wider public sphere could no longer be taken for granted. Global history offered a return to center stage. At the same time it was a political project: anti-nationalist, cosmopolitan, sometimes with a strong anti-European bias, although it is doubtful that global history, as is sometimes alleged, by necessity «provincializes» and belittles the historical and cultural achievements of the West.

What has happened since the 1990s, and why is there a need to «re-think» global history as we intend to do in the Balzan-FRIAS project?

First of all, it is important to be aware of a set of issues that require *no* revisionist re-thinking and *no* reconsideration in the light of changing realities. They remain a perennial backdrop to any kind of boundary-crossing historiography. The fact that they will never find a definitive solution should not be seen as a sign of weakness and fragility.²² They are simply unavoidable and constitute the epistemological infrastructure of any vision of history that encompasses humanity as a whole. These issues can be framed as tensions:

(1) the tension between universalism and cultural relativism, in other words, the question of whether moral norms that were first formulated under specific conditions in space and time can claim general validity, or whether standards of justice and morality are attributable only to particular ethnic and national groups;

(2) the tension between the terminology of the social sciences as they emerged in the West from the early modern period onwards on the one hand, and indigenous nomenclatures of social and cultural self-description on the other;

²¹ There are quite extravagant attempts in that direction, e.g. Loy 2002.

²² See also FILLAFER 2017.

(3) the tension between the local and the global as levels of lived experience as well as of historical analysis, with a wide range of positions between the extremes at the «micro» and «macro» ends; this is generally known as the problem of «scale».²³

These three tensions have not changed in character since the early days of global history and therefore have never lost their relevance while the field has been developing and maturing.

Before discussing problems that occur at the level of theory, I would like to return once again to the institutional practice of global history. To what extent has it succeeded in making inroads into mainstream historiography? I can only speak for Germany – neither a world center for global history nor a complete backwater, in other words, a more or less average country.²⁴

A good indicator of the significance of particular fields is their coverage in academic periodicals. The leading history journals in Germany are now moderately open to non-Western and global topics, and they have added experts on those fields to their editorial boards. However, very few items from the international literature get reviewed in those journals. The *Historische Zeitschrift*, the most prestigious history journal in the German-speaking countries, reviews a mere dozen titles on non-Western subjects per year. Such subjects have not yet penetrated what might be called the discipline's sphere of canonical attention. They are no longer ignored, but are still treated as marginal. To be sure, younger global historians have little interest in German-language publications, even at the level of book reviews. They are eager to place their articles in the leading English-language journals, and they sometimes hesitate to offer first-rate work to German publishers. Still, the topical scope of reviewing is a good criterion for the degree of openness of a particular national academic establishment. The German case shows that even in a country where national history is usually discussed without patriotic fervor, global history still has a long way to go.

This relates to a different aspect of institutionalization: permanent positions at universities. Since the historical profession is not growing in numerical terms, new job opportunities for global history can typically only be created by re-dedicating existing professorships or, at least, adding a global «tag» to them. Moreover, it is still unwise for scholars at the postdoc stage to bank completely on global history. At the many small universi-

²³ Recent contributions: BERTRAND – CALAFAT 2018; GHOBRIAL 2019; DE VRIES 2019.

²⁴ See also NOLTE 2008.

ties that form the greater segment of the German academic labor market compared to a few big centers such as Berlin, Munich, or Leipzig, historians with a broader teaching portfolio continue to be preferred. Looking for international career opportunities, therefore, is a sheer necessity. On the whole, global history is making progress though at a snail's pace and more at the level of non-tenured junior positions than that of full professorships.

What are the current topics of cutting-edge research? This may be the first question asked by non-historians in the audience tonight: what are global historians actually doing all the time? Since the German scene closely follows international trends and there is no truly first-rate journal that could be taken as representative, it is advisable to switch to international sources. For an up-to-date sample, though obviously too small to claim numerical validity, one may turn to any recent issue of the *Journal of Global History*, the pilot periodical in the field. In July 2019 the JGH published the following articles:

(1) "The Making of a Pastorian Empire: Tuberculosis and Bacteriological Technopolitics in French Colonialism and International Science, 1890-1940."

(2) "'Treated like Chinamen': United States Immigration Restriction and White British Subjects."

(3) "The Lumumba University in Moscow: Higher Education for a Soviet-Third World Alliance, 1960-91."

(4) "The 'Emancipation of Media': Latin American Advocacy for a New International Information Order in the 1970s."

(5) "Whither Growth? International Development, Social Indicators, and the Politics of Measurement, 1920s-1970s."

These topics have several features in common. Any of them could have easily appeared in a *general* historical journal such as *Journal of Modern History* or *American Historical Review*. They are «modest» and workman-like in the sense that they do not attempt to cover the entire world or even major parts of it. Moreover, they can be handled with the well-established methodology of historical studies and do not require a special tool chest for tackling global subjects. Apart from the last topic, they are all anchored in a particular region and sometimes have a clear regional perspective on the world at large. Some of them are «international» in a conventional sense rather than «global», more precisely, they refer to international orders as they are being shaped by national governments. Even the history of science (topic no. 1) is connected with a specific imperial framework.

If this particular issue is representative of the leading periodical for global history – and I believe it is – then one cannot avoid the impression

that global history has undergone a process of *Veralltäglicung*, of normalization and perhaps even de-glamorisation. It is no longer a charismatic field where daring and brilliance are displayed, but the home of unobjectionable craftsmanship. Global history has arrived in the haven of respectability. This is, basically, good news.

Of course, this is only one side of the overall picture, and there are also more intellectually audacious topics around. A special issue of the prestigious journal *Past & Present* (volume 238, November 2018), which is not a journal explicitly specializing in global history, on «the Global Middle Ages» is one such pathbreaking venture that diverges sharply from mainstream work in medieval studies and marks true innovation.²⁵ It also opens up a space for fundamental debates: is the concept of «global Middle Ages» helpful at all? Does it perhaps stick the fashionable label «global» anachronistically onto a subject matter that resists any such framing? What insights is the new perspective likely to generate? Does it require a new conceptual apparatus? How is that kind of multi-regional and multi-language research to be organized on the ground? Such questions are far from being routine. My argument is simply that risky and provocative topics of this caliber nowadays are much less common than they were in the heroic days of early global history.

A look at the book market reveals a much more complicated picture than a survey of learned journals. The reason is that global history, more than many other branches of historical studies, easily appeals to a wider public. Global history sells. Publishers are desperate to attach the g-label to anything that even remotely lends itself to such a classification. Widely different kinds of books, therefore, appear on the shelves marked «World / Global» that can be found in any major bookstore. At least six different types of publication share this crowded space:

(1) the multi-archival and multi-language monograph that is the true gold standard of global history, most frequently to be found in sub-fields such as migration history, the history of traffic, travel and communication, and the history of cross-cultural trade;

(2) the *epochal* synthesis by a single author or a small team of contributors – a fairly rare occurrence;²⁶

(3) the *topical* synthesis by a single author or a small team of contributors;²⁷

²⁵ HOLMES – STANDEN 2018.

²⁶ A model of its kind is BAYLY 2004; an example of team-work is REINHARD 2015.

²⁷ An example: BECKERT 2014.

(4) collections where a general topic is parceled out to regional specialists; the global burden then rests entirely upon the shoulders of the editors and their own introduction;²⁸

(5) the grand narrative with a message, where often the message comes first and sources are adduced to support or illustrate it;²⁹

(6) the rare theoretical treatise on what global history is or ought to be.³⁰

All this ranges under the heading of «global history». For readers approaching this literature from the outside, the overall impression must be that of a bewildering variety in scope and quality. Speaking of quality: What should be one of the most demanding fields of historical studies is in fact crowded and almost colonized by a popular or semi-popular literature that evokes promises of globality and totality almost impossible to fulfill. The role of the book market is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, we should be grateful for any opportunity to reach out to the general public. On the other, the lure of above-average sales figures prompts authors with slight credentials as global historians to enter the race for fees, media attention, and perhaps even an invitation to the Davos World Economic Forum.

The book market and the arbiters of public taste are unlikely to be responsive to academic debates about what constitutes good or bad global history. Reviewers in the popular media tend to be uncritically overwhelmed by anything coming along with world historical pompousness, while scholarly journals do not take account of the big bestsellers of popular history. Versatile writers master a range of registers, from high professional to catering for the busy airport passenger. For these and other reasons, many practitioners are reluctant to define clear criteria for quality and even to offer definitions that might serve to demarcate a sphere of responsible global history. Let me illustrate this calculated vagueness with a fictitious, in fact only semi-fictitious, scene from everyday conference life.

A number of people who identify themselves as global historians meet to discuss «the prospects of global history». Like any aspiring field, this one, too, is subject to permanent soul-searching. After a stylish and unsurprising keynote by one of the immaculate master performers on the international circuit, an innocent young colleague raises her hand and suggests that one might pause a moment and reflect on what global history «really» is. There are so many definitions around – would the conference perhaps care to de-

²⁸ DEJUNG – MOTADEL – OSTERHAMMEL 2019.

²⁹ For example, MORRIS 2013.

³⁰ OLSTEIN 2015; CONRAD 2016; STANZIANI 2018.

cide upon one, at least for the next two days? Several papers on the agenda seem to look slightly more like transnational history than global history while there is also one on the Paleolithic. A bit confusing. – Silence. Then a middle-aged colleague, a figure of some clout in journals and grant-giving bodies, congratulates the questioner on her brave and perspicacious comment, but cannot help reminding the assembly that global history is «an inclusive and expansive enterprise»: «We do not police concepts. And we do not build walls. Trump does». End of debate.

Let me summarize my little balance sheet:

Global history has established itself in many countries as a viable type of historical discourse. Above all, and rebutting a chorus of early sceptics, it has turned into a professionally unassailable paradigm for research. There are now hundreds of gold standard monographs that dispel any suspicion that global history might just be a brushed-up remake of the old world history with its shallow roots in original research and its penchant for grandiose speculation.

Global history has opened up entirely new fields for research. It has breathed new life into the old method of comparison and has extended the concept of «relations» far beyond the only established field where it used to play a role: international, mainly diplomatic, relations. It has raised the general awareness among professional historians for wider contexts to the point where it has become almost impossible to regard a nation-state or an empire as a totally self-contained entity. It has also, paradoxically, undermined the once fashionable talk of «strangeness» and «alterity». In the thought style typical of global historians, there are fine shades and grades of «otherness», but hardly any binary oppositions of Us and Them. Above all, the most notorious of those binary oppositions has become obsolete: that of the West and an undifferentiated «rest». So much for success and stability.

At the same time, there remains fragility of various kinds. Global history suffers from overextension and from having grown too fast. In addition, it has never really been challenged at a high scholarly level and therefore never had the chance to sharpen its thinking in defence against well-considered doubts. Ideologically motivated attacks from nationalist positions were rightly dismissed. Yet some of the few well-considered and precise objections that have been raised were misunderstood as assaults on the project of global history as such. Thus, chances were missed to discuss, for example, the legitimate question of what constitutes a convincing «global» explanation of a complex event.³¹ The rise of global history took place in

³¹ See the challenge mounted by BELL 2014 and the failure by DRAYTON – MOTADEL 2018 to take Bell's critique with the seriousness it deserves. For context see FORREST – MIDDELL 2016.

a remarkably uncontested way if we compare it with the bitter fights between social and cultural historians in the 1980s.³² This came at the cost of a lack of opportunities to engage critically and self-critically with the underpinnings of the «global turn».

Let me now make five more specific points. Not all of them will be shared by a majority of global historians, but this is the nature of any debate.

Firstly, returning to the institutional aspect of historical studies, activists of global history find themselves at a crossroads. Should global history strive to build up the infrastructure of a movement and a sub-discipline, as has already happened to a considerable extent? Or should it remain a loosely organized way for suggesting how to see familiar topics in a new light? I would personally prefer the latter but understand the inexorable drive towards the former. This is, frankly, the best way to attract funding and, with it, young talents who need financial support for their work. But it is not without risk. Building a niche can also mean disappearing into the niche – a path towards comfortable self-marginalization. In that case, the mainstream of the historical profession can carry on more or less as before, and all global issues are safely delegated to the card-carrying experts inside their bubble.

Secondly, global historians are eager to emphasize that they are not omniscient, that global history is not the history of everything and that it eschews encyclopedic comprehensiveness. Yet, if it is the history of *something*, which something? Economic history is about work, trade and finance; military history about soldiers and their victims; religious history about practices of devotion and communal life, and so on. But what is the referent of global history? The planet in its geographical concreteness? World population? Humanity as a normative construct? A world-system? An answer should be given, knowing that any answer entails new problems.

Yet there is at least one easy way out, so easy that it remains below the radar of theory: the notorious g-word can be used as an adjective added to established kinds of sectional history. The interesting question then is (and I have myself pursued it in fields such as the history of sports or of classical music):³³ what happens when we give well-established fields a global twist? When economic history becomes global economic history,³⁴

³² OSTERHAMMEL 2018. This is a point frequently mentioned in conversation by Jürgen Kocka, who himself was a protagonist in the rise of social history during the 1960s and 1970s and whose methodological writings continue to be models of their kind.

³³ OSTERHAMMEL 2012; OSTERHAMMEL 2014.

³⁴ Recently: ROY – RIELLO 2019; for similar developments in labor history see HOFMEESTER – VAN DER LINDEN 2018.

legal history discovers non-Western law,³⁵ environmental history examines global issues,³⁶ the history of music turns into global musical history,³⁷ intellectual history expands its turf into global intellectual history? This harks back to the problem of niche versus perspective. We should not just draw established sub-disciplines into the global history niche, but rather leave the niche and convince others to experiment with globalizing perspectives in their own disciplinary settings.

Thirdly, one should expect the results of such experiments to be mixed. Sometimes asking global questions works, sometimes it does not. Just one personal example, way off the major concerns of global historians: Hans Belting, the doyen of German art history, has established that the use of perspective in early Renaissance painting was strongly influenced by Arabic optical treatises. Put more generally: the artistic Renaissance was a co-product of Italy and the Orient.³⁸ Nothing similar can be said about music. I was once invited to speak about European classical music in a global context. My hosts, who waited for a revolutionary new interpretation that would prove Europe's deep musical debt to Asia, were gravely disappointed when I offered them my thesis that apart from tiny exotic traces – a few Turkish sounds in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Carl Maria von Weber – art music in the German lands from Bach to Brahms was a closed cultural system oblivious to cross-cultural interaction. In other words, a global perspective seems to work much better for visual art than for music, at least until about the 1880s. In general, it would be wrong to regard global perspectives as invariably preferable and superior. Globality is no end in itself. It neither overrides nor invalidates other perspectives. If we go global, we must give reasons for doing so. In reviewing a collection of essays on general perspectives of global history, Peer Vries, a veteran global historian with a keen eye for methodology, was puzzled as to «*why* the contributors have gone global».³⁹

Fourthly, those reasons cannot be separated from the overall situation in the world. Global history had an easy ride in the 1990s when the world seemed to be heading towards convergence, further integration and a globalization whose unpleasant side effects were confined to small minorities.

³⁵ DUVE 2018.

³⁶ MCNEILL – ROE 2012; MCNEILL 2015; and many other works of this pioneer of global environmental history.

³⁷ STROHM 2018.

³⁸ BELTING 2008.

³⁹ VRIES 2019, p. 116 (author's italic), a review of BELICH – DARWIN – FRENZ – WICKHAM 2016.

It is no coincidence that all the major social science theories of globalization were developed at that time.⁴⁰ Nothing really new has been added since.

Today the situation is different in two respects. On the one hand, global networks are being weakened and dismantled. Nationalist and imperialist policies are reappearing on the international stage. International law and unwritten norms of civility are losing much of their binding power. Global governance remains a pious hope. In the world of Trump, Putin, and Xi Jinping, globalization has to be reconsidered and so too must global history.

On the other hand, because global history is intrinsically an anti-nationalist and cosmopolitan project with the pedagogical impetus to educate the general public and to de-nationalize school curricula, it is treated with suspicion or even hostility by all nationalist and authoritarian regimes. In many countries of the world, it is difficult or downright dangerous to be a global historian. In China, where global and world history flourished in the liberal 1990s, it is nowadays only tolerated when it celebrates the perennial greatness of the Chinese people «in world history»; something similar is true for present-day India, where Hindu-nationalist narratives receive strong official support. One cannot over-emphasize what Christopher Bayly, one of the greatest of global historians, wrote in 2011: «[...] evolutionary nationalist historicism remains, at the beginning of the 21st century, the dominant form of historical understanding across much of the world».⁴¹ I have used this quotation on several earlier occasions, and I cannot repeat it often enough. It would be irresponsible for historians leading privileged and mobile lives in the great Western centres of learning to ignore the bleak reality that Bayly has expressed so succinctly.

Fifth and finally: theory. Again, Peer Vries is right when he notices a «dislike of theory», implicating in his criticism my own work, too.⁴² Given global history's early family resemblance with the globalization theories of the 1990s, it is surprising how little theory figures in current debates. Of those early globalization theories only vague concepts such as «glocalization» or «hybridity» continue to be mentioned now and then. The grand theories of world development – mostly variants of systems theory – have never gained many followers in global history circles although they should not be written off prematurely.⁴³ Only the concepts of entanglement, con-

⁴⁰ OSTERHAMMEL 2015.

⁴¹ BAYLY 2011, p. 13.

⁴² VRIES 2019, p. 115.

⁴³ Wallersteinian world-systems analysis is now much less schematic and dogmatic than it used to be. See BABONES – CHASE-DUNN 2012.

nected history and *l'histoire croisée* have been elaborated sufficiently, especially by Sanjay Subrahmanyam in many of his publications.⁴⁴ Otherwise, the classical questions of historical methodology – questions of explanation and comparison, of periodization, of model-building and the use of ideal-types, of the relationship between agency and structure – are rarely discussed in respect to global history.

Instead, the semantics of «mobility», «connectivity» and «networks» – often with only superficial reference to network theory – are widely used as a kind of routinely cited surrogate theory. Interesting suggestions are currently being made to develop a tool kit of various forms, functions and effects of connectivity.⁴⁵ They deserve to be tested in practice, but it is too early to say whether this will happen and with what outcome.

In addition, it remains to be discussed what it means to base a fairly general concept of history on the notion of «mobility». A consequence of that approach has already been to dissolve the conventional social history of communities and hierarchies into the history of migration and diasporas. Admittedly, these very important aspects have always been neglected by conventional social history. European social historians have found it very difficult to come to terms with immigration societies, and there is a long story of misunderstanding even in the United States. Global history has the chance to develop a much richer picture, if only it does not go too far with its fixation on mobile forms of existence. The vast majority of human beings on the globe have lived sedentary lives uprooted only, just as today, by war and natural disasters. The list could easily be continued. We see it as our task in the Balzan-FRIAS Project on Global History to raise methodological awareness without forcing global history under the yoke of any particular theory. The pluralism of the field has to be preserved while the anarchism of «anything goes» should be reined in.

This also means that questions of definition cannot be avoided. As a disciple of Max Weber, I should have started with a definition. Now I am concluding with one. There is a consensus among practitioners of large-scale history that distinguishing between world history and global history is an act of Teutonic pedantry and humourlessness. One may beg to differ. World history, universal history, transnational history, global history and – a great favorite with the non-academic public – big history, are all highly

⁴⁴ Subrahmanyam does not see himself as a pure theorist. His theoretical contributions have to be distilled from his numerous substantive analyses. A good point of entry into his recent thinking is SUBRAHMANYAM 2016.

⁴⁵ Just to mention a few titles: TSING 2005; LINKLATER 2011; ANTUNES – FATAH-BLACK 2016.

distinctive approaches that should not be mixed up even though they may be combined in the endlessly pliable practice of historians. I do not hesitate to offer tentative definitions of all those approaches.⁴⁶ But I will only treat you to my definition of the day – I have experimented with several others in the past – of global history. You will be surprised that it is a very restrictive definition:

Global history is a perspective for considering all kinds of interactions – and their consequences – across political and cultural boundaries, especially within vast and multicultural spaces. It focuses on connections and connectedness, with special attention given to non-reciprocity and power differentials and to those connections that have a transformative effect. From the point of view of a given social or political unit, global history is less interested in endogenous dynamics – as world history is – than in forces impacting from the outside.

Fortunately, we are no prisoners of our own concepts. We can play with them, discard them and turn our attention to entirely different matters. This also applies to global history. You do not have to accept my definition of global history. It has served its purpose when it inspires you to develop a definition of your own.

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⁴⁶ They are given in OSTERHAMMEL 2018, pp. 26-29.

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ABSTRACT – In his inaugural lecture of the 2019-2020 academic year, Jürgen Osterhammel, winner of the 2018 Balzan Prize for Global History and director of the research project funded with the second half of the award, the Balzan-FRIAS Project in Global History at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS),

gives a «realistic assessment» of the current situation of global history as a field of study. In recent decades, global history has established itself as a viable type of historical discourse and a solid paradigm for research, opening up new inroads and invigorating old methods therein. The author acknowledges that the field has acquired a certain degree of permanence and stability on the academic scene, but sees its success as fragile and vulnerable, leaving practitioners at a niche-vs-perspectives crossroads: should global history strive to build up the infrastructure of a movement and a sub-discipline? Or should it remain a loosely organized way for suggesting how to see familiar topics in a new light? A brief survey of some of the chronological landmarks in the history of the field and summary of key ideas and major developments since the 1990s lead into Osterhammel's discussion of the reasons why his Balzan-FRIAS project has set out to «re-think» global history, which he defines as «a perspective for considering all kinds of interactions – and their consequences – across political and cultural boundaries, especially within vast and multicultural spaces [focusing] on connections and connectedness, with special attention given to non-reciprocity and power differentials and to those connections that have a transformative effect». He concludes with a statement on the project's task: to raise methodological awareness without limiting global history to the confines of any particular theory and to preserve its pluralism while avoiding the anarchy of randomness.

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