

GLOBAL HISTORY.
STRUCTURES, STRATEGIES, OPEN PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

Through the critical discussion of some recently published works, the author reflects on the role of global history in the general landscape of contemporary historiography. In particular, he highlights the reasons why it is necessary to reconsider and recast the notion of Eurocentrism, which has long been dominant in historical research on the modern and contemporary age. One can, of course, continue to adopt a basically Eurocentric perspective (Europe in the world), especially in relation to the past two centuries of history. However, in light of a global-scale analysis, many typical beliefs of the classic Eurocentric approach do not seem as convincing today as they once did. Moreover, it seems evident that the global perspective necessarily suggests a rethinking of the very idea of Europe in the course of the modern age (Europe as such). In fact, at the beginning of the modern age, Southern Europe – today often considered backward in relation to Northern Europe – was decidedly at the forefront of globalization processes, performing the role of the prime protagonist of the process of European expansion around the globe. In any case, it appears clear from examination of the texts analyzed in what follows that today also scholars who do not necessarily share this approach are actively addressing global history and its problems.

Keywords: Global History, Eurocentrism, Historical Methodology.

In the past few decades, the global perspective has become increasingly attractive in the field of historical research. On the one hand, there are now dozens of books that have illustrated its genesis, methodological characteristics and research strategies; and empirical research on the subject is of enormous proportions.¹ On the other hand, its success has encouraged, at

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¹ Without any claim to exhaustiveness, see, for instance, CONRAD 2015 and DI FIORE and MERIGGI 2011.

the level of the academic organization of teaching and research – particularly, but not only, in the English-speaking countries – a proliferation of departments and study centres explicitly devoted to it. In Italy too, as part of degree courses in history, the teaching of global history has been implemented steadily in the past few years.

In short, global history today is fashionable, although the consensus that it enjoys is far from unconditional. Indeed, we can say that the more its success has increased, the stronger and more well-reasoned have become the reactions of those who, vice versa, do not share its guidelines.²

But in what does the proposal of global history consist? There follows an attempt to answer this question in extremely concise and simplified terms: 1) Global history pursues the objective of widening the panorama of historiographical investigation and of giving importance, consequently, not only to the Western context, on which historians have traditionally focused, but also to other areas of the world; 2) It seeks to achieve this goal by openly criticizing the narrative model which, since the nineteenth-century foundation of modern historical research, has been dominant: history as history first of Europe and secondly of its progressive dissemination in the world, by virtue of the supposed ‘genetic’ superiority of its values and mental orientations with respect to those characteristic of other civilizations and cultures; 3) It proposes, for this reason, an interpretative model of history couched above all in terms of intertwining, contact and connection, rather than conflict, contraposition and clash, among the various planetary societies, and aims to highlight their fundamentally hybrid nature which derives from, significant though not always visible, intercultural transfer processes;³ 4) From this point of view, global history is radically critical not only of Eurocentrism but also, more generally, of any form of ethnocentrism, because it tries to delineate an ‘entangled’ or ‘mestizo’ history;⁴ 5) It does not pursue, instead, as sometimes erroneously believed, the goal of reconstructing a synchronic and simultaneous history of the entire range of world civilizations; rather, it strives to identify single events or issues that involve societies and cultures of a different nature in a significant way, within a transnational and sometimes transcontinental space, which in general does not coincide with that of a single state or a single nation.

The fact remains that, in the common perception, global history means above all non-Eurocentric history. Starting from this implicit assumption we will now try to verify, on the basis of three recent books, whether and to

² See, for instance, PRODI 1999: 51.

³ SUBRAHMANYAM 2014; GOODY 1999.

⁴ GRUZINSKI 2004.

what extent a notion like that of Eurocentrism seems today to have really suffered from the attack launched against it by global history.

Published in 2016 was the updated edition of the classic study by Wolfgang Reinhard on the history of European expansion, whose first edition – four dense volumes which bore precisely that title – was published between 1983 and 1990.⁵ We now have a single imposing volume which is titled differently – *The Submission of the World* – and which proposes instead in its subtitle, with a small but significant variant, as well as with a chronological update, the original title: *Global History of European Expansion (1415-2015)*.⁶

This is not a pure and simple condensed reprint of the four original volumes, although many parts of them are offered without significant variations. The new edition is based on careful work of comparison with the literature that appeared during the quarter of a century between the publication of the last volume of the first edition and 2015. The mode of this comparison is easily verifiable by the reader in the large final bibliographic appendix, which occupies almost 300 of the total 1650 pages of the work. It can thus be seen that much of the recent literature used by Reinhard, sometimes sharing its results, sometimes criticizing its approach, is a literature produced in the sphere of global history. He moves from a ‘history of European expansion’ to a ‘global history of European expansion’.

We are faced with – it seems to me – the implicit combination of a Eurocentric perspective and a globalist one, in the belief that the two perspectives are not at all irreconcilable. In reverse, a combination is not only possible but also fruitful if, instead of focusing on the traditional internal constitutive factors of European history and on the corresponding geographical areas, one widens the analysis to include all the spaces in the world in which Europeans between the end of the fifteenth century and today have expanded, for better or for worse. In this sense, Eurocentric history remains fundamentally such, even if its reference space is no longer Europe. And of this still eurocentric history the author investigates in particular those spatial contexts in which the alleged self-sufficiency of the European model is fatally questioned by those currents of interchange and cultural contamination that are – as we have seen – one of the favourite themes of global history.

A few decades ago, as Reinhard was preparing the first edition of what he declares to be his most important work,⁷ the topics at the centre of his research did not at all enjoy particular importance in the context of West-

⁵ REINHARD 1983-1990.

⁶ REINHARD 2016.

⁷ REINHARD 2016: 11.

ern historiography. On the contrary: “In the 1980s they had a rather marginal character”. But – Reinhard argues – in the meantime there has been a change in the collective mentality which now makes their recovery and reworking more than justified. Today, in fact, that theme – not much considered at the time – “is at the center of both political and scientific discourse”.⁸

Very well informed on the forms taken by the impact of European expansion over more than five centuries in the various areas of the globe, Reinhard’s reconstruction largely employs, as said, the results generated by studies on global history and also engages in a measured debate with post-colonial studies; that is, with the specific cultural current of thought that in recent decades has most radically challenged traditional Eurocentrism; a radicalism that has in some cases even induced its exponents to look suspiciously at globalist historiography itself, accused of surreptitiously relaunching a basically Eurocentric perspective.⁹ And it is, substantially, this latter that we find, albeit with Reinhard’s full critical awareness, at the centre of his work. Despite making use of global contexts, and although it is driven by an approach often very critical of the modalities of Western agency in the world (today as yesterday), the analysis provided by the great German historian remains, in fact, primarily a discourse on Europe and its national states. It strongly stresses the gap between ideological representation, on the one hand, and reality on the other; the gap between the level – we may say – of civil promises and that of the many brutal and authoritative actions committed by the European states during both their ancient and recent colonial ventures. However, it fully reiterates Western exceptionalism, which the post-colonial perspective – all aimed at spending itself in favor of an “on equal terms” history¹⁰ – would instead resize and replace with alternative and at the same time autonomous narratives. In fact, one of the goals of post-colonial studies is to question both supposed European uniqueness and the political achievements which the West usually considers the symbols of its superiority: for example, the modern state, the centrality of the law, the nation grounded on popular sovereignty, democracy. This is seen as the only way to reconstruct in their own terms historical and cultural experiences marked by a profound otherness with respect to Western civilization.¹¹ Modern state, centrality of the law, nation, popular sovereignty, and democracy are all incomplete achievements,

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See, for instance, ASCIONE 2009.

¹⁰ DIETZE 2008: 69-84.

¹¹ An alternative line of analysis – critical on the issue of the supposed Western exceptionalism – is proposed in some of the essays collected in SEN 2005. But see, also, SEN 2004.

according to Reinhard; in the West, however, they are less incomplete than in any other part of the world. In any case, they are all achievements of a Western origin, of a West which sees therefore through his analysis its role as the engine of modern world history reconfirmed.

Let us turn now to consideration of another book. The author – Serge Gruzinski – has in recent decades repeatedly adopted a strongly polemical approach to the narrowness typical of traditional Eurocentrism. He now appears to be, in his turn, basically persuaded of European supremacy in the making of the global world.¹² In past decades – as said – in works on the border between anthropology and history, Gruzinski – achieving results of exceptional quality and importance – has devoted much effort to interpretation of the first centuries of the modern age in terms of transnational and transcultural perspectives; the same ones advocated by the proponents of global history and therefore inclined to reduce the ‘obsessive’ – and at the same time limiting – emphasis on concepts such as state and nation on which most of the narratives of Western history rely. At the core of Gruzinski’s investigation is the idea that history should be studied as connected; that is, as a history of hybridization and contamination between different cultures and societies; a history in which the currents of interchange are mutual, and not uniquely characterized by a unilateral influence of the Western colonizing centres on the colonized peripheries.

It is an interpretation that the author has developed mainly by investigating a specific transcontinental political formation of the modern age, i.e. the Iberian Catholic monarchy between the late 1500s and early 1600s, of which he has evocatively illustrated the reasons that authorize its consideration as a field of intense multidirectional *metisage* and entanglement.¹³ In his latest book, Gruzinski resumes some of the results of his earlier work. His goal, however, is the construction of a profile of global history in which Europe is granted an indisputable centrality. The very concept of Eurocentrism, on the other hand, is to be considered – Gruzinski argues – as one of the specific products resulting from the globalization processes of the early modern age.

In the 1520s, two particularly significant events on a global scale took place within the space of a few years: on the western side, the start of the Spanish conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés; on the eastern one, the attempt made by the Portuguese to penetrate China.

The good result (for the Spaniards) of the Mexican adventure coincided with the beginning of the construction of a new West in an area of the

¹² GRUZINSKI 2015 (in Italian, GRUZINSKI 2016).

¹³ GRUZINSKI 2004.

world that had never come into contact with the ancient *Ecumene*. The less known – and almost never mentioned – Portuguese initiative, vice versa, failed miserably. And yet, it was from the simultaneity of these two ventures outside its borders that Europe acquired the conceptual assumptions to imagine itself as the centre of the world.

The roots of Eurocentrism, then, are located at that moment. In antiquity and during the Middle Ages, in fact, in the context of what was traditionally called ‘*Ecumene*’, the Europeans turned their eyes only towards the East. But from the sixteenth century onwards their gaze became broader: on the one hand, the West; on the other hand, an East that for centuries escaped the European domination and that, however, Europeans not only attended with an unprecedented intensity but also connected with the new Western world. The global plot that wrapped the world in the following centuries was therefore characterized by a largely European agency. But which Europe are we talking about?

The concept of Eurocentrism is, in fact, generally linked to factors that have marked the history of what is today Northern Europe. It is thus connected to issues such as the scientific and industrial revolution (the Weberian “disenchantment of the world”), or the experience of British and French imperial domination on a global scale between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of the most interesting results of Gruzinski’s analysis is instead the appropriate emphasis on the processes of transformation of this concept.

The Europe that the world came to know in the sixteenth century was in fact the Iberian Europe, or better, considering the strong involvement of Italians, a Southern Europe. In the following centuries, this Europe underwent a process of undeniable decadence and became, for the holders of Western ‘progress’, a not only geographical but also civil and cultural liminality.

Thereafter, the northern Europeans started to apply to the southern Europeans the same negative assessments that from the sixteenth century had been used by the latter to describe the populations of the new West that they had conquered. After being the centre of diffusion and direction of the Eurocentrism of the early modern age, the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean became not only territorial but also cultural peripheries, parts of the ‘South’ of the world. This evidence induces Gruzinski to pose a question of great importance and interest: what are we talking about when we discuss European identity and modernity, since both are composed of many heterogeneous materials?

From the perspective suggested by this book, Eurocentrism has many different faces, whose relative relief changes over time, so that the very nature of Europe – characterized by some unifying factors and many highly differentiated and conflicting ones – is a concept far from being static.

Moreover, it has been precisely the contact with other parts of the world that has played a decisive role in enhancing these differences, as well as in making them become causes of inter-European ideological and cultural conflict. The '*leyenda negra*', whose initial episodes Gruzinski recalls in this book, from this point of view is perhaps the first manifestation of that sense of distancing which still today makes it difficult for Northern Europe to resign itself to the idea that the protagonists of the first European globalization were the Iberians and the Italians.

We have thus come to address a crucial point: the relationship between Eurocentrism and capitalism. It belongs, in many ways, to the list of the strongest certainties on which our perception of history is grounded.

As well known, the idea of modern capitalist rationality as the exclusive outcome of Western culture – "*nur im Okzident*", only in the West – is at the basis of Max Weber's work *Economy and society*.

It is therefore very interesting to see how the new perspectives of global history are today actively interfering with this apparently so reassuring paradigm and contributing to its conspicuous transformation. This transformation is very evident in another recent work, the last one considered here: the profile of the history of capitalism written by Jürgen Kocka,¹⁴ not a global historian, but a scholar who for decades has been working – at the highest level – on themes of German history and comparative European history.

However, attentive and receptive as he always has been to every important innovation in the historiographical panorama, Kocka in this work actually thinks in terms of global history, giving, therefore, evidence of the strong influence exercised today by this trend also among those who habitually make use of other conceptual instruments and tools.

Specifically – Kocka warns in this work – European is not the phenomenon of capitalism as such; specifically European is the concept through which that phenomenon is usually thought. In the same way, specifically European (and Western) is the tendency to consider it a test of modernity; a tendency that emerged above all between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Marx's and Weber's theories of capitalism were produced, and in which, at the same time, the concept of capitalism was linked in a substantially exclusive way to the industrial dimension. But – Kocka argues – before the age of industry there were worldwide many other forms of capitalism. Considering the opening of "historiography to global history",¹⁵ now necessary is a deep reassessment of the position of the West in the history of this multifaceted phenomenon.

¹⁴ KOCKA 2016 (German edition 2013).

¹⁵ KOCKA 2016: 21.

One of the conclusions that Kocka draws from this reassessment is that, in the thousand years between 500 and 1500 AD., capitalism, in its mercantile form, had a global character and that within this global capitalism the role of Europe was for a long time not that of a forerunner, but rather of a latecomer with respect to the Arab and Chinese worlds, the true protagonists of pre-contemporary capitalist globalization processes. Of course, things changed between the late modern age and the nineteenth century, when the industrial form of capitalism became dominant and developed almost exclusively in north-west Europe, “even though it was made possible and conditioned by interconnections worldwide”.¹⁶ In other respects, the global perspective adopted by Kocka enables him to reconsider capitalism also from the point of view of the corresponding forms of work. The global capitalism of the modern age – but to some extent also that of the contemporary age – was not necessarily based on wage labour. Outside Europe, it was rather predominantly organized in the form of non-free labour (forced labour, slave labour, or indentured labour).¹⁷

There is enough evidence – I believe – to conclude that the perspective of global history has already played an important role, regardless of its possible future developments; and not only for the enlargement of the spatial reference frameworks that it has solicited, but also because of the incentives given to reconsideration of Western history itself in terms of ambivalence, as the three books examined here apparently demonstrate. We can still be persuaded – as we have been in the past – of the European centrality with respect to the modernization processes of the last centuries, from which today’s global world has sprung. But adoption of the scale of global analysis necessarily entails a profound reexamination of that Eurocentric perspective which we have long considered too obvious, linear and coherent.

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¹⁶ KOCKA 2016: 72.

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