

EARLY MODERN HISTORY
IN THE *JOURNAL OF GLOBAL HISTORY*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses to what extent, if any, global history has changed our understanding of the themes and problems of early modern history. It does so by undertaking a specific case study, that of the *Journal of Global History*, a periodical founded in 2006 on the initiative of a group connected to the London School of Economics and published by the Cambridge University Press. The journal is used as a lens through which to examine a number of issues: from the definition of global history to its links with other emergent historiographical perspectives (section 1); the time periods, topics and spaces on which global history has focused (section 2); and the discipline's protagonists and sources (section 3).

Keywords: Global History, Early Modern History, Historical Journals.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone wishing to understand whether and how the discipline of global history has changed our understanding of early modern history must adopt a historiographical perspective. One viable approach, as taken in this paper, is to choose the *Journal of Global History* (henceforth JGH) as a case study. The JGH, founded in 2006 by a group of scholars from the London School of Economics and published by the Cambridge University Press, has undeniably become an authoritative voice in its academic field. Studying the JGH also helps to build a vantage point from which to gain an initial

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insight into preliminary questions that cannot be avoided (section 1), before examining, with reference to early modern history, the periodization, themes and spaces (section 2), and the protagonists and sources of global history (section 3), in order to identify the outstanding problems facing the discipline. All these questions are the subject of lively debate, for which the journal has been a sounding board and to which, for want of space, we must limit ourselves to making only essential indications.

Let us begin with some basic information about the journal. It was founded by three economic historians: Kenneth Pomeranz (UCLA), the well-known author of *The Great Divergence* (2000), Peer Vries (University of Vienna), and William Gervase Clarence-Smith (School of Oriental and African Studies, London). The supervising team has changed over time, and is currently made up of the aforementioned Clarence-Smith (editor-in-chief), an expert in the economic history of Southeast Asia; Barbara Watson Andaya (University of Hawaii), another Southeast Asia specialist; Merry Wiesner-Hanks (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), an expert in the history of gender; and Ronald C. Po (London School of Economics), an expert in Chinese history. The editorial board comprises around twenty scholars, twelve of whom belong to universities in the United States or the United Kingdom, while the others are based in Australia, Germany, Egypt, Japan, Hong Kong, France and Switzerland. The global dimension is broadened, however, if we consider their origins: nine of the twenty are from non-Western countries, although many of them were educated in the West. As a whole, these scholars ensure the availability of time-honoured expertise and wide knowledge of various parts of the world, although many concentrate on the modern and contemporary periods and Asian specialists predominate.

1. IN SEARCH OF GLOBAL HISTORY

What global history means for the editors of the JGH is made clear by their statement of intent: the journal aims to address – according to the declaration that appears in every issue – “the main problems of global change over time, together with the diverse histories of globalization”.¹ Thus global history, the definition of which is discussed in a large body of literature, is here construed as history that frames phenomena and processes in a global context and also as the study of the globalization process. This is a broad definition that takes account of both the chosen perspective

¹ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-global-history>.

and the specific theme of globalization, as confirmed by articles published in the journal over the years.

The JGH has close links with other emerging historiographical trends. It in fact hosts research that may be described, and is described, as ‘world history’ (see Manning 2003) and ‘connected history,’ making this global ‘laboratory’ extremely prolific. In this regard suffice it to note that the founder of connected history, the Indian historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam, has written for the journal (Subrahmanyam 2007). Global history as a broad-spectrum classification, then. And the identification of its origins also appears inclusive, as emerges from the article by Patrick O’Brien, *Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History*, which serves as the JGH’s ‘prolegomenon’ (O’Brien 2006). O’Brien names the founding fathers of global history as William McNeill (1917-2016), author of the renowned *The Rise of the West* (McNeill 1963) and one of the promoters, in 1982, of the World History Association; Leften Stavros Stavrianos (1913-2004), author of *A Global History: From Prehistory to the 21st Century* (Stavrianos 1970); and Marshall Hodgson (1922-1968), whose works include *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Hodgson 1974). Nevertheless, what O’Brien termed a “cosmopolitan enterprise” (4) was in fact based on a very long tradition which began with Herodotus and includes, among others, such non-Western historians as the Chinese Sima Quian, who lived in the first century BCE, and the Arab Mas’udi, who died in 957 CE. Hence, also as regards the question of innovation triggered by global history – debated between those who see it as a turning-point and those who emphasize its continuity, recalling the polycentric nature of its origins – the key word is the one used in the title of O’Brien’s essay, where global history is linked to the idea of ‘restoration’ of various traditions.

Finally, in regard to the identity of global historians, it is noteworthy that the majority of them work in Anglo-American universities. The exclusive use of English in the JGH is therefore not surprising, given that it has its origins in the English-speaking world where global history is mainly practised. But what is instead surprising is the journal’s review policy, which is focused almost entirely on books published in English; indeed, only six per cent of the reviews appearing in the JGH have been of books written in another language.

2. GLOBALIZING EARLY MODERN HISTORY: TIME PERIODS, THEMES AND SPACES

The monopoly of the English language does not impede a geographically and chronologically wide-ranging historical reconstruction. In fact,

the JGH's editorial project involves the entirety of human history, which is examined in each of its periods with especial attention to its global connections. In the contributions where global history is construed as the history of globalization, the journal gives voice to the diverse hypotheses of authors alternating between a view of globalization as a long-term process that began in the fifteenth century, and another of a globalization that came into being in the nineteenth century, and yet another that sees it as a phenomenon of the past thirty years. Inspection of the articles dealing, in full or in part, with the early modern era shows that the traditional chronological barriers used to subdivide early modern history (as also ancient and mediaeval history) are swept away in favour of a long, in fact very long, time span: from an article on the formation of great empires between 3000 BCE and the nineteenth century (Turchin 2009) to that on the migrations of the European population between the sixteenth and twentieth century (Lucassen and Lucassen 2009). Global history removes both geographic boundaries and chronological barriers, but it brings to the fore the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, even if they are revisited because they do not appear to know the traditional internal caesuras: the 1455 of Gutenberg, for example, and the 1517 of Luther, moments that are generally referenced to explain the existence of two European – Catholic and Protestant – worlds.

If we turn now to the themes of global history, there is no doubt that the discipline has raised new questions about well-known issues. It has allowed entrenched interpretations in various fields of research to be called into question – from those of colonialism to the ‘Great Divergence’ – subjects that are much debated in the journal but which I will leave to one side because Marco Meriggi and Vittorio Beonio Brocchieri consider them more fully in their contributions to this publication. Even so, there emerges a more general historiographical discourse centred on a comprehensive reinterpretation of modernity understood as a process that has led to the world in which we now live. The journal has the programmatic aim of overcoming the dichotomy between ‘the West and the Rest’² and for a decade has contributed to revising the notion of the West's unstoppable progress towards world domination in favour of a view of the world as a polycentric system characterized by cultural and material exchanges between Europeans and the others. Several changes were not born in the West and then exported elsewhere; rather, they were the outcome of relations between different parts of the globe. The West, in other words, is not *the* undisputed protagonist of modernity.

² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-global-history>.

And this, it seems to me, is the thread that links the articles that tackle a wide range of subjects: not only those that deal with economic history, but also others concerned with cultural, religious, social and political phenomena. In the cultural sphere, a phenomenon like the birth of modern science, for example, is explained by stressing the exchange of ideas, objects and techniques with the Orient: the result of the 'useful knowledge' to which, for example, the accounts of European travellers to China and India attest (Berg 2006, 2013). Religions lose their traditional differences: hence there emerges a Buddhism with unusual traits, one more similar to monotheist religions (Wheeler 2007), while Christianity is depicted as a unified religion because the focus of studies is not on the Christianity of internal wars but the Christianity of the colonial space, where syncretism triumphed (Parker 2013). Dichotomies that have long contrasted the West as the place of free labour with the Orient, especially Russia, as the place of servitude (Stanziani 2008) disappear. On the political level, the relations between European and local elites through the concept of 'hybridisation' so dear to Subrahmanyam have been emphasized (Roy 2011).

Two words recur in many articles: *relations* and *comparisons*. Relations include, for instance, those that connect Piedmont and Bengal by means of the introduction of Piedmontese silk-working techniques in Bengal (Davini 2009), or those that connect Great Britain to China through the first British diplomatic mission to China in the late eighteenth century (Berg 2006). Relation can signify 'impact', such as that on prices in various parts of the world in consequence of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (O'Rourke 2006), or it can simply represent a 'view' such as that of the Russians who arrived in America in the eighteenth century (Winkler 2012). As regards comparisons, these are in some cases made between different places during the same period (Davids 2006), and in other cases (with strong risks of decontextualization) between different places at different times, from Vietnam and Japan in the sixteenth century, Mexico and New Zealand in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and Canada and Australia between the French Revolution and the Second Vatican Council and beyond (O'Brien 2016).

The geographical spread is extensive and involves all the continents and most of the globe: from Africa (Inikori 2007; Prange 2006) to India (Washbrook 2007), from China to the Americas (2015: 3). The comparative perspective gives space to Europe/the West, terms that are sometimes ambiguously used interchangeably, at least in titles, whereas the analyses are in fact limited to individual countries or regions of Europe and/or the West. Thus, to give but one example, in a piece on deforestation and great divergence, the title alludes to a comparison between China, Japan and the 'West,' but the West is represented only by England and France (Saito

2009). In internal comparisons of Europe and the West, the juxtaposition of Europe/West to other civilizations prevails. Where no comparison is made, non-European areas are prioritized. In fact, the greater interest paid to these areas is declared openly in the *Instructions for contributors*, which state that “conscious of past historiographical inequities, the journal particularly welcomes contributions from Asia, Africa and Latin America”.³

3. GLOBALIZING EARLY MODERN HISTORY: PROTAGONISTS AND SOURCES

With regard to protagonists, it should be noted that the accusation sometimes levelled against global historians, that of favouring an élite, i.e. of reproducing perspectives that are traditional in other ways, seems unfounded. If anything, it is true that the protagonists of JGH articles are generally frontier figures: traders (of goods and of men and women), migrants, missionaries, slaves, travellers, people who voluntarily or under duress move across confines and generate exchanges: from the Armenian traders who in the eighteenth century united Madras and Manila (Bhattacharya 2008) to the Russian merchants who, also in the eighteenth century, arrived in America having crossed the Pacific (Winkler 2012). The migrants include those who in the seventeenth and eighteenth century set out from Manila, sailed the ocean and created the first Asian communities in the Americas, in particular in Mexico (Clossey 2006); the slaves include the Indian Diegos, who in the 1570s asked the Spanish courts to grant their freedom (van Deusen, 2015), and those who at the start of the nineteenth century left America for Liberia (Everill 2012). For the most part these were men, but the journal also has the aim of establishing relations between global history and gender studies (2011: 3).

As regards sources, which are closely connected to protagonists, to be addressed is another criticism often made of global historians: that of producing broad syntheses based on the work of others rather than research based on first-hand sources. As far as the journal is concerned, this is absolutely not true. Instead, one can observe that in general it has a preference for sources that throw light on relations, which is to say those produced by so-called mediators: letters from missionaries, travellers and trading company officials, or travel accounts, but also goods and products of exchange. The majority of these are not complete series of sources (of archival data, for example), but rather documents that lead to case studies (Wheeler

³ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-global-history/information/instructions-contributors>.

2007). There is no claim to exhaustiveness. It is true – as some critics of global history note, primarily in the field of so-called subaltern studies – that sources referring to non-European peoples are not abundant and that many themes are tackled exclusively, and often inevitably, with European documentation alone.

The problem of the relationship between first-hand sources and bibliography is certainly one of the unresolved issues of the global perspective, one which has prompted some scholars to rethink the way of doing history. One such is Giorgio Riello, professor in Global History at Warwick University and contributor to the JGH (Riello 2010), who has recognized that research on the global scale sometimes requires decades of individual work. He has thus stated, proposing a more collective way of doing history partly based on the skills of others, that: “Je suis arrivé à une conclusion très simple: si je veux écrire une histoire globale du coton, le point de départ ne peut pas être l’inépuisable océan des archives ni même la bibliographie qui encombre mon bureau. Le point de départ n’est pas dans les travaux des autres mais simplement chez les autres” [“I have arrived at a very simple conclusion: if I want to write a global history of cotton, the point of departure cannot be the inexhaustible ocean of archives or the bibliography that clutters my desk. The point of departure is not in the work of others but simply with others”.] (Riello 2007: 27-28), in other words in dialogue with other researchers endowed with expertise.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, to be pointed out is that, in general, global history is a category in progress still undergoing definition. In this sense, it is significant that concrete research is accompanied by extensive theoretical discussion among scholars. It is as if it were currently more important to legitimize than to practice this history, which on the one hand appears in fashion, but on the other faces more than a few obstacles, including those linked to the defence of (supposed) national identities.

As regards the relationship between global history and early modern history, in the first instance the JGH demonstrates how the global perspective has highlighted the centuries of early modern history, a discipline that in Italy is experiencing profound marginalization in educational (but not only) terms. On the other hand, the JGH shows how global history has helped call into question the nexus, often taken for granted, between the West/Europe and modernity.

Moving to the remaining questions, the considerable expansion of times and spaces has specific consequences. In terms of periodization,

there emerges an early modern period that no longer appears to recognize the internal caesuras that are traditionally applied to Europe and are less significant on the global scale. This is an early modern era that, on closer inspection, tends to become blurred, even if the category of 'early modern' continues to be used in the journal. It is therefore necessary to understand which periodizations and which cleavages are valid for global history. In respect of spaces, the increase of interest in non-European areas of the world leads to comparisons that sometimes risk recreating somewhat condensed images of the West and Europe (identified by an interchangeable use of the two terms, which should be used with greater precision). This gives rise to questions about the relationship among global history, the history of Europe and the history of the West.

It is clear that the reconstruction of history on a worldwide scale requires substantial financial resources and multiple linguistic skills if one wishes to go beyond the English-language literature, the monopoly of which results, among other things, in the marginalization of other historiographical cultures. Hence three points seem to me particularly important from a methodological perspective. The first relates to the way of doing history based, at least in part, on synthesis. This is not a choice of all global historians, but the lengthening of timeframes and broadening of spaces brings a risk of advancing a history unsupported by documentary evidence.

The second point concerns the risk of anachronism: by asking questions about problems relevant to our time, do historians ask the right questions about the past? Do global relations, variously defined as hybridizations or syncretisms, accurately portray the realities of the past or do they exist only in the minds of global historians?

The third point concerns the ideological nature of global history. This involves something more than the obvious fact that every history is conditioned by the ideology of those who study it. Patrick O'Brien wrote about the problem explicitly: although he had no sympathy for post-modern positions, he maintained that the agenda of global history was not that of the scientific objectivity or impartiality of the scholar, but rather the "moral purposes, connected to the needs of a globalizing world" (O'Brien, 2006). For it is true that national history also had to do with the creation of national identities, and the history of Europe has to do with the construction of the European Union. But does this therefore mean that global history, in which similarities often overshadow differences and relationships eclipse conflict, and in which everyone seems progressively more similar in time and space, may have been made to manufacture a new identity in support of a cosmopolitan ideal?

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