

## *Why Do Expectations Persist that Global History Should Be History?*

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The frequency with which books appear announcing a “new” approach to “global history” by invoking this or that theory from historical sociology is puzzling, since what we casually call “global history” obviously is and has always been historical sociology. It has never been history as conducted by historians. There is no archive of global history, no new global history data to be discovered, evaluated, refined into knowledge and narrative. That is the peculiar role of the historian, whose skills conform more precisely to the twenty-first century need for a science of credibility than those of nearly any specialists, should historians ever care to inform the world of it. History is not the study of the past, but the arts of arguing the probability that there is a past. It is in the final analysis a literary enterprise driven by the goal of wresting narratives of human experience from the evidentiary record.

By contrast “global” history is a derivative enterprise in which historical scholarship is harvested and husked, usually under the flail of one sociological theory or another (more or less obvious), to affirm that the past is largely predictable and future discoveries by historians will confirm it. Historians are not by definition trained to do global history (*pace* some graduate programs that produce global historians who can rarely fulfil the actual role of historians), but any historian can decide to take it up, as harpsichordists could decide to take up the pianoforte. It didn’t mean that the harpsichordist had become a pianist. It meant the harpsichordist could also play the piano. Both made music, but in very different ways.

This was not mysterious to the practitioners – Kohn, Crosby, Hodgson, Wallerstein, Eisenstadt, Moore, Arrighi among them, all of whom were straightforward in their practice of historical sociology – who are regularly invoked by self-described global historians today, and this has recently been stated effectively by Peter Vries in an essay in *International Review of Social History*.<sup>1</sup> I proposed in my little book *What Is Global History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008 – the title being inexplicably appropriated by a later author)<sup>2</sup> that global history was in practice a choice of paradigmatic narrative. And, it cannot be otherwise. There is no gold mine from which

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<sup>1</sup> PEER VRIES, “The Prospects of Global History: Personal Reflections of an Old Believer,” *International Review of Social History* 64, no. 1 (2019): 111–21, doi:10.1017/S0020859019000099.

<sup>2</sup> PAMELA CROSSLEY, *What Is Global History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

you can extract watches, rings and Olympic medals. There is no sheep from which you can shear Campbell tartan.

Why would historians continue to propose so ebulliently the novelty of drawing theoretical resources from historical sociology? I think there are several reasons, some too obvious to point out without apology (so I apologise), some worth lingering over.

The first explanation for almost anything is ignorance, and it may apply in some cases. Only as long ago as when I was a graduate student, knowledge of theory – which almost always meant political science or sociology – was fading. Weber was only somebody to take pot shots at while invoking “orientalism” or “imperialism” or “Eurocentrism.” Wallerstein (along with Foucault, Bourdieu and de Certeau) was a necessary allusion, but alluding was good enough. I now think this was part of a trailing off of historiography’s substantial engagement with theory. In reading manuscripts over the past two decades, I have found an alarming number of younger authors who are rediscovering fire and re-inventing the wheel. An apparent lack of education in historiographies in their own fields leads too many of these younger authors to leap from their bathtubs exclaiming “Eureka!” over insights (which are truly their own) that are already well-embedded in the scholarship. I am willing to assume that a similar parochiality causes some who are doing “global history” and others to be unfamiliar with the history of “global history”.

Second may be the implied association of global history with globalization. Some historians assume global history is the actual history of some kind of reified globalization, and others assume that conceptually “global” as a form of historiography derives from the milieu of globalization. Here the main problem may be “globalization.” Some time ago – fifteen years? Twenty? – “globalization” had a fairly clear meaning. It referred to the twentieth-century processes by which technological advances such as rapid communications and transport had combined with political advances such as radically lowered tariffs to redistribute patterns of production and consumption. Living standards no longer conformed to national boundaries, but were globally striated by class, demography, gender, race, and political stability. American workers were competing with global workers paid a fraction of their wages, and purchased items manufactured very cheaply in distant locations. But in the past two decades historians have delighted in the inevitable rounding off of “globalization” to mean anything allowing people to interact over long distances, and as a consequence have pushed “globalization” earlier and earlier – first back to the days of the telegraph and the ocean liner, then to the railroads, then to open sea shipping, then to print, then to the Silk Roads, then to ancient trade in copper and lapis lazuli. Basically, humans have been in a process of globalization since the migration out of Africa, and the first modality was walking. As globalization as a concept has come to mean very little, those who associate “global” history with “globalization” may assume a similar debasement.

Third is what I consider a perfectly understandable confusion of “world” history and “global” history. I have proposed and still think it is useful to consider “world”

history a distinct form of truly historical narrative. Its unique pedagogical role encourages the incorporation of heuristic concepts, among them the bases of periodization. The structure may to be cinematic, in a “meanwhile back at the ranch” style, and the grand climax of the story tends to be (with some beautiful exceptions) the era in which the author lives. Some of the great comprehensive histories – from Rashid ad-Din to John Acton to William McNeill to Jerry Bentley to the “big” history (the human part) of David Christian – are built on these principles. Narrative detail and plot lines manifest the comfortably historiographical foundations of the enterprise. There have been recent, very enlightening, variations on this genre by historians exploring a single phenomenon or substance – salt, paper, cement, etc. – in which a theory-free narrative of ostensible “global” scope can open up some novel perspectives. And comparativists have used similar tools to interweave regional histories to provide key insights. World history, I would say, is historical narrative on a global scale.

Some critics read world history as “global” history. This can be further muddled by the tendency of editors today to prod authors to work “global” into titles where it does not belong, merely to crank up the gravitas and exploit topical interests. The syndrome is perhaps best given away by the phrase “global turn,” which appears to mean not only upscaling the scope of historical narratives but aspiring to hypotheses that reach well outside historiography. Thus David Bell complains of the “grab-bag” of “global history,”<sup>3</sup> when it appears he was reviewing a work of world history (*The Prospect of Global History* – yes, it has “global” in the title). But titles are not books, editors are not authors. World historical books might occasionally read as a sort of grab bag, and how big a problem that is depends upon the tastes of the reviewer. For some it is serious enough that they have pronounced the end of “global history” (while, I think misidentifying the genre they think is about to end). Others somehow prescribe that “global history” should start flying right by jettisoning theory altogether. World history can do that, I would say. Global history will never be able to.

Global history, I have argued, is other. It is integrative, usually high-concept or aspiring to that, and to various degrees is conscious of its sociological heritage. It is the grand “universal” history of Emma Willard and H. G. Wells; the stadial histories from LeClerc (de Buffon), Hume, Smith, Gibbon to Morgan, Marx, Engels, Elias, Hodgson; the “world systems” models of Braudel, Wallerstein, Beaujard, Lieberman (all anticipated, in my view, by Pirenne), and so on. So, in a reverse of the pattern I noted above, Jaspers, Mumford, Hodgson and others thinking in broadly “axial” terms tended to use “world” to describe their philosophies of history, and I would describe all them (with, I make bold to believe, their approval) as doing “global” conceptualising.

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<sup>3</sup> DAVID BELL, “This is What Happens When Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network,” *The New Republic*, October 26, 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/rctcl/1470/orld-connecting-reviewed-historians-overuse-network-metaphor>.

Fourth is the impatience of many historians with theory, particularly in the work of colleagues. This is different from being ignorant of theory. It is being hostile to it. Historians are specialists in verifiability. Generalization is for them a weakness, because there is always an exception. Theory is an enemy, because theory is always undetermined as true or false. Even when a theory is affirmed by some facts, all facts can never be known, and therefore a theory can never be trusted. I have recently suggested that the resulting tendency of historians to attribute credibility primarily to documentation, and documentation primarily to significance, is illogical on its face and probably responsible for an ongoing fixation on comparisons of Asia with supremely documented Europe, even when the author claims the goal is to decentre Europe.<sup>4</sup> Developing a disciplinary perspective on indeterminacy would not, in my view, make history less historical, nor would it justify flights of fancy. But it might open historians again to casual co-existence with theory.

Less obvious in some respects is the effect of the emergence of critical anthropology, critical sociology, indigenous epistemology and the critique of orientalism in the later twentieth century. The insights from these trends have shaped modern social science and critical theory in the arts, clarifying what had only been implicit in aesthetic theory, in particular: the inescapable role of ideology in the deformation of perception, the ineluctable projection of personal ideology in the processing of perceptions and assignment of meaning. These ideas had been basic to discussions of the senses and interpretation of perception at least from Kant to de Tracy to Marx and Gramsci, Foucault and de Certeau, but their explicit recognition seems to have been regarded till the late 1960s as the business of philosophy – not history, which deals in ostensible fact. Through psychoanalytic paradigms, literary and aesthetic theory (à la Said) the ideas entered the social sciences (which already had critical theoretical heritages in Popper, Levi-Strauss, Kuhn and others) and historiography.

For a time – I would say it was from the 1970s through the first decade of the twenty-first century – historiography welcomed and was enriched by critical theory. Since then, a theory fatigue seems to have afflicted the profession. Partly, I think, this is due to a largely correct assumption that the once novel critiques of the last century made their points, and have been naturalised in the mental habits of younger historians. Partly it was due, I fear, to impatience with a tendency of some practitioners to recycle semantic bits from the theories they espoused, without always persuading that they understood the theories themselves. Whatever the explanation, I find the current history field in the English-speaking world to be largely unreceptive to theory in general (or should I say, acknowledgement of theory), and as a consequence the assumption is that global history must be made to be history, otherwise it is *prima facie* fake.

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<sup>4</sup> PAMELA CROSSLEY, “China Normal: Patterns of Urbanization, Industrialization, and Trade on a Eurasian Discursive Base,” *Modern Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (2020): 1278–314, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X19000246>.

The compromise of theory in the twentieth-first century is vividly captured in Dipesh Chakrabarty's question, "Why cannot we... return the gaze?"<sup>5</sup> In a review article of 2017, my question was, why would you want to?<sup>6</sup> Gazing, in this Lacanian sense, is a construct of European social science. Gazing is essential to Kaplan's critique of imperialist meaning projection and the epistemology of significance, but "the gaze" is itself a product of European meaning projection. It cannot be distilled out and given an autochthonous origin. This is true of any thread in the social science fabric.

Much of the demonstration of how this works is lying on the surface. In the 11th and 12th centuries Europe was an intellectual dependency of the Islamic world (as I have argued in *Hammer and Anvil*).<sup>7</sup> In that condition, Europe internalised a figure, as an example, such as ibn Sina (though I would argue much of his profile was later obscured by image builders for Descartes). Given the twenty to two-hundred years year gap between the circulation of work in Arabic or Persian and its translation into European languages, by the time of ibn Khaldūn's availability, Europe was graduating from its intellectual dependency and was entering its time of overland (ultimately overseas) expansion. It was also leaving behind the Latin academic milieu through which scientific and philosophical discourse from Arabic had been piped. As a consequence, ibn Sina is part of the instrument through which early modern and modern Europe gazed upon the world, and ibn Khaldūn was somebody who got gazed at. Whether you are the subject or the object of the European epistemological enterprises depends on what condition Europe was in when you were alive. Social science is European and to significant degree American (thinking here of not only of foundational Morgan but also Weber's fascination with Chicago, and his efforts to get W. E. B. du Bois translated into German). That doesn't mean it is poison, irremediably hegemonic or hopelessly corrupt, it means it has to be used with reflexive awareness of what it really manifests, which is European and North American cultural history.

This currently unresolvable dilemma of theory is part, I think, of what makes it something that historians would rather ignore just now. It is the thing that looks at itself looking at something else. For historians, documents (which have their own engendering issues, but of a generally much more tractable sort) are better. In global history that are no documents except those that can be mined, quoted and excerpted.

This deep interior conflict of contemporary global history as an extension of sociology, anthropology, and economic theory, may be part of the reason for the backlash against global history in some historiographical circles in China, India, Russia, Hungary, Turkey, France, and the United States. For historians in China and India in particular, global history is a tool of contemporary imperialism (or hegemonism,

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<sup>5</sup> DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>6</sup> PAMELA CROSSLEY, "Gravity, Compendia, and the Always-Postponed Escape," *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 1 (2017): 137–44, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022816000371>.

<sup>7</sup> PAMELA CROSSLEY, *Hammer and Anvil: Nomad Rulers at the Forge of the Modern World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

anyway), not least because it is conceptually inimical to nationalistic narrative. In critic's view, its paradigms of modernization, convergence, and globalization all discredit and marginalise national histories and culturalist valorising. In the critiques I have read from China, "global" history is a stand-in for "globalization," and the submersion of national autonomy in a web of global trade, finance and environmental protocols that emanate almost exclusively from the interests of the United States and western Europe. "Global history," likewise, constrains exceptionalist national narratives in a web of historical paradigms and social science theory.<sup>8</sup>

But apart from the rather crude insistence that a global historical view subverts nationalist projects, there are more subtle and probably more promising foundations for the critique. Indigenous and "global south" theories have for some years been invoked in studies to dismantle the dominance of European epistemology and modernist paradigmatic narrative – see for instance Samir Amin, *Global History: A View from the South*<sup>9</sup> and Aram Ziai, *Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals*.<sup>10</sup> Such discourses tend to re-cement global history to twentieth-century globalization, and to connect material issues of differential well-being not only to the past but to the ways of affirming, narrating and evaluating events of the past. In such critiques, scale does not dilute immediacy. The prospect for disrupting the subject-object relations between "West" and "non-West," between "north" and "south," and between "present" and "past" is significant for global history, precisely because of the vulnerabilities of its theory dependence and its inseparability from European and North American history.

The current discomfort in historiography regarding constructivism and indeterminacy will pass as all things do. The greater barrier, possibly, to historians' accepting global history as a sociological genre is the insistence in most historiography that the object of any "history" is research, analysis and writing to find an authoritative narrative that once erected will not be necessary to rebuild – as contrasted to a tentative reading of agreed facts, meaningful today and offered for discussion, a prod to further inquiry and examination, but carrying within itself the surety of its own obsolescence. My guess would be that more acceptance, reading and creative contributions to a vaguely defined but nevertheless recognizable genre of "global history" would follow.

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance CHRISTIAN FOX, JUNFU ZHAO, WANHUAN CAI (福克斯克里斯蒂安, 赵君夫, 蔡万焕), "Critical Global Studies: An Analysis of the Experience and Theory of the New Imperialism" (批判的全球化研究：对新帝国主义的经验和理论分析), *Studies on Marxists Theory in Higher Education* (高校马克思主义理论研究) 2, no. 1 (2016): 86-102, <http://smthe.tsinghuajournals.com/article/2016/2096-1170/101349A-2016-1-012.shtml>; DONG XINJIE (董欣洁), "The Imperialism in Western Global History" (西方全球史中的帝国主义), *Research on Historical Theory* (史学理论研究), 2 (2013), retrieved at [https://www.sohu.com/a/237314356\\_747064](https://www.sohu.com/a/237314356_747064).

<sup>9</sup> SAMIR AMIN, *Global History: A View from the South* (Dakar and Bangalore: Pambazuka Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> ARAM ZIAI, *Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals* (London: Routledge, 2016).