

The Prospect of Global History

James Belich John Darwin Margaret Frenz and Chris Wickham eds
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Originating in a 2012 conference at the University of Oxford on 'New Directions in Global History,' *The Prospect of Global History* inaugurates 'a new series in global history.' While not exactly a manifesto, its tone is programmatic. The most conspicuous feature of this collection of eleven essays (including a robust 'Introduction' and an 'Afterword') is the unapologetically deep chronological coverage, which spans antiquity and the 'Middle Ages,' alongside the early modern and modern eras. The inclusion of the premodern within the remit of global history is not unprecedented, but remains unusual enough to cause, by itself, a reassessment of current methodological and geographical perspectives. This volume is addressed to two constituencies, that is, to both global historians and historians of premodern societies, and invites them to engage with each another's work. The editors' effort, in the 'Introduction,' to offer a typology of approaches to global history results in a schematic grid, within which the volume's essays fit comfortably. The first approach they identify is the 'history of globalization,' characterized by distinct 'vectors of connectivity'—diffusion, outreach, dispersal, expansion, attraction, nodality. The second approach is 'comparative history,' including histories of 'divergence.' The third approach is a history of 'connectedness,' mobility, networks, and nodal points. (John Darwin's 'Afterword' recombines most elements to offer a slightly different typology.)

One consequence of the volume's extended chronological coverage is a questioning of the relationship between global history and globalization as a historical phenomenon. Is it possible to write global history of a time before the oceanic explorations of the fifteenth century connected the Afro-Eurasian landmass with the American one?

Among the editors' crucial aims is that of proving that a global prospect can and should be applied to ancient and medieval phenomena, in many ways using similar tools as those used for early modern and modern history. Nicholas Purcell's essay, for example, gives a sketch of the kind of commodity-chain history that has been one of the most distinctive and successful products of recent global history. His subject are those natural resins used to produce incense, a highly valuable 'exotic'

commodity since antiquity, whose harvesting in the region of the southern Red Sea, and trade through the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, the Levant, can be traced in unusually rich detail through both textual and archaeological evidence. Purcell observes that the circulation of such a precious and portable material affected the economic and political spaces it traversed; the widespread ritual usage and psychoactive properties of incense, in addition, open up a number of avenues to cultural, religious, and even cognitive approaches. In another of the chapters devoted to premodern history, James Belich presents the mid-fourteenth-century plague epidemic caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* as a medieval case study of the interaction between ecological, economic, and geopolitical change. Historians of the late Middle Ages have long debated whether and how the effects of the ‘Black Death’ can be assessed and measured. Belich connects them with a dramatic redistribution of resources, which reached the lower strata of society and spurred a phase of expansion and specialization of trade in the European space and its hinterlands.

The volume’s long-term prospect on global history also translates into a renewed emphasis on categories and methods that were once the province of twentieth-century world history and historical sociology. Robert Moore’s essay on the ‘global Middle Ages’ borrows from the repertoire of world history to present a new global periodization, where the centuries commonly understood, in European history, as the ‘central Middle Ages’ are redefined as a global age of ‘intensification,’ driven by ‘city-based civilization.’ A methodological essay by Jürgen Osterhammel is an earnest endorsement of the value of historical sociology for historians of the global, and even of the viability of ‘civilization’ as a useful category for historical analysis. Osterhammel is refreshingly modest, on behalf of the whole profession, in recognizing the derivative and eclectic nature of much historical ‘theory’—a little too modest, perhaps, if one considers the role of Fernand Braudel’s work as an inspiration for historical sociologists in the US during the 1960s and 1970s.

A similar revival of methods and questions popular between the 1930s and the 1960s animates Kevin Hjortshøj O’Rourke’s essay on what long series of prices can (still) tell us about market integration, convergence and divergence, and the connectedness of economies before the nineteenth century. A ‘Little Divergence’ between northwestern and southern European areas in the early modern period preceded the ‘Great Divergence’ between Europe and China, although neither convergence nor divergence are linear and self-sustaining economic processes. There is something deeply satisfying and familiar about the kind of Labroussian macro-indicators produced by this revamped econometric approach. Yet some of the old doubts also persist: for example about the meaningfulness, in such a long-term analysis, of artificially fixed geographical units in the long term (largely, and problematically, corresponding to modern countries), and especially about the compromises involved in distilling series of homogeneous and comparable data from

the wild diversity of surviving documents. O'Rourke is wary of monocausal explanations where 'the economic' is foundational. He subscribes, however, to the overarching teleology implied by the 'why are we so rich and they so poor?' question (in David Landes's formulation), which underlies all convergence/divergence debates.

Matthew Mosca and Francis Robinson discuss global history from the Chinese and the Islamic perspectives, respectively. As Mosca observes, for all its movement away from Eurocentrism, the history of globalization still tends to cast the Qing as reactive, rather than active power. He focuses on a smaller-scale topic (the only such case in the volume)—the genealogy of descendants of Chinggis Khan compiled by the Mongolian nobleman Ghombojab—as a test-case revealing the far-reaching information networks available to a Mongolian scholar familiar with the Qing court in 1725, and the importance of channels of communication and contact through Inner Asia, a relatively unexplored space for global histories. Knowledge networks are also central in Robinson's essay; indeed one of the most thought-provoking thematic proposals in the entire volume is Robinson's suggestion that we focus on master-disciple relationships as creators of networks over long distances within the pre-modern Islamic world. One suspects that a similar approach would work well for the Buddhist world, too.

The essays by Antony Hopkins and Linda Colley cover the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and engage more or less explicitly with the notion of empire. Empire is a crucial but historiographically suppressed category in the history of the United States, Hopkins argues, even for the period when the American Republic had overseas colonies, and deployed an explicit language of empire. Hopkins's discussion of the viability of 'empire' as a category for US power in the post-WWII world is stimulating, particularly in its attempt to emancipate empire from territoriality, which he sees as characteristic of a particular imperial 'stage of development.' Hopkins purposefully underplays the continued importance of actual territorial control for the sustenance of the 'informal' American empire. Yet it is often around American military bases that the distinctive dynamics of imperial power, including legal privilege, gendered violence, and land-grabbing, are more easily recognizable in the second half of the twentieth century (one thinks of Aviano, Okinawa, or Bahrain). In Colley's essay the category 'empire' is less prominent, but still very much at the heart of the piece. Her subject is the global spread of constitutions in the nineteenth century. The spread was spurred by traveling politicians and revolutionaries, and by a crowd of other writers, whose constitutional projects were never promulgated, but exerted an influence nonetheless. The significance of this remarkable 'contagion of constitutions,' Colley argues, lies not only in the global transmission of ideas of rights and the rule of law. Constitution-writing underpinned imperial strategies, for example within the British Empire, or, momentarily, with the Japanese Meiji Constitution of 1889. Colley's chapter is the only one in this volume to ask outright whether women

played a role in the global history that she explores. (She answers the question in the negative.)

It is unlikely, in fact, that this volume will allay current anxieties about the ‘left behind’ of global history. Gender history is absent from the volume’s range of examples—and whether this reveals something more general about global history and gender is currently the object of debate. Intellectual history, as a history of ‘meaning and understanding,’ awaits its own global approaches. The dangers of essentialism are forcefully signaled by the editors, yet Robinson seems to tap into the revival of ‘Protestant’ as a trans-historical, civilizational category when he equates ‘Protestant’ with ‘personal responsibility and this-worldly action.’ (The recent, rather puzzling, fortune of ‘Protestantism’ in social-scientific discourse deserves serious historiographical analysis).

In a way, the ‘global’ scale showcased in this collection is *augmented* by the volume’s unusual chronological depth. As a result, and perhaps inevitably, *The Prospect of Global History* foregrounds histories of Very Big Things, and remains largely unfazed by teleology, which in some cases (most explicitly in ‘divergence’ debates) is embraced by the potential distortion of enthusiasm. The meeting between global and premodern histories is exciting and important, however; it highlights different geographies, suggests new explanatory frameworks, and dramatically expands the range of global phenomena historians can consider. This pioneering book will inspire new research, and, it is hoped, spur further discussion, for example, about micro-analytical scales and global history, and perhaps especially about the relationship between the documents that historians translate, compare, and combine, and histories on a global scale.