

L'histoire, pour quoi faire?

Serge Gruzinski
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L'histoire, pour quoi faire? is a complex book—a short but highly problematic book. On the one hand it develops a reflection on the meaning of history in contemporary societies. On the other hand, it addresses the historical phenomenon of globalization, starting from today and moving backwards to its sixteenth-century beginning. During the second decade of the sixteenth century, within a few years two particularly significant events of a global scale took place: on the western side, the start of the Spanish conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés; on the eastern side, the attempt made by the Portuguese to penetrate China.

For the Spaniards, the good result of the Mexican adventure coincided with the beginning of the construction of a new West, in an area of the world that had never come into contact with the ancient ecumene. By contrast, the least known—and almost never mentioned—Portuguese initiative failed miserably. Nonetheless, from the simultaneity of these two projections outside its borders Europe acquired the conceptual assumptions to imagine itself as the center of the world.;

The roots of Eurocentrism, then, are placed there. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, in the context of what was traditionally called ecumene, the Europeans pushed their eyes only towards the East. However, from the sixteenth century onwards their glance became oblique: in the direction of the West, by virtue of their conquest they gave birth to a sort of cloning of themselves. They did so while facing a contrast with the 'world of the won,' from which long-lasting experience paths of *metisage* (intermingling) and contamination later emerged. At the same time, the direction of an East had for centuries escaped the European domination, and Europeans not only attended to this East with an unprecedented intensity, but also connected it with the new Western world. As a result of the slavery imposed by the Europeans, the same fate also affected Africa in the modern age. The global plot that encompassed the world in the following centuries was therefore characterized by a largely European agency. But what Europe are we talking about?

The concept of Eurocentrism is generally linked to factors that have marked the history of what is today Northern Europe. As such, it is connected to issues such as

the scientific and industrial revolutions (the Weberian ‘disenchantment of the world’), or to 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 Serge Gruzinski’s study is an appropriate, different emphasis on the transformation that Eurocentrism has undergone as a concept over time.

Perhaps because it was defeated and dominated, as happened to the societies of Central and South America; or because it frequently hosted merchant and missionary projections, as occurred in Asia, the Europe that the world knew in the sixteenth century was in fact the Iberian Europe, in its turn equipped with numerous Italian collaborators. Southern Europe, therefore, the same Europe which during the following centuries, knew a process of undeniable decadence—to the point of becoming, in the eyes of those who in the meantime imposed themselves as the holders of Western ‘progress,’ synonymous with a geographical, civil, and cultural liminality.

Later on, the northern Europeans began often applying to the southern Europeans the same negative assessments that the latter had elaborated from the sixteenth century to describe those populations of the new West that they had conquered. After being the center for the diffusion and direction of early modern Eurocentrism, the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean became, therefore, territorial and cultural peripheries; thus, in many respects, parts of the ‘south’ of the world. This causes Gruzinski to pose a question of great importance and interest: what do we talk about when we discuss European identity and modernity, since both are composed of many heterogeneous materials? For instance, not only - to use Weber’s terminology - ‘Protestant ethics’ and ‘spirit of capitalism’, or Italian Renaissance, but also –the author argues - so to say ‘radical’ and conservative Catholicism in its Iberian version: seen from the perspective suggested by this book, Eurocentrism shows itself with many faces, whose relative relief changes over time. This tendency to metamorphosis demonstrates that the very nature of Europe is a far from static concept. It includes, alongside some unifying factors, many highly differentiated and conflicting elements. Indeed, the contact with other parts of the world, played a decisive role in enhancing these differences, as well as in making them become causes of inter-European ideological and cultural conflict. From this point of view, the initial episodes of the ‘leyenda negra’ that Gruzinski recalls in this book are perhaps the first manifestation of that sense of distancing which—the author reminds us—still today makes it difficult for Northern Europe to accept the idea that the protagonists of the first globalization were the Iberians and the Italians.

Of course the beginning of (Iberian) globalization was not only the occasion for an expansion of Europe. Nonetheless Gruzinski argues with conviction that Europe was certainly the main subject of the process of globalization: he does so without fear of taking distance from the critical positions outlined on this matter by postcolonial

studies and cultural studies. In pages that are among the most intriguing of his study, Gruzinski re-engages with other issues that he already considered in previous works—namely in *Les quatre parties du monde* (2004), *Quelle heure est-il là-bas. Amérique et Islam à l'orée des Temps modernes* (2008), and *L'Aigle et le Dragon. Démesure européenne et mondialisation au XVIe siècle* (2012). In fact he shows that, in some ways, the game played during the sixteenth century in the Americas was a continuation of the game begun before the epic of the Conquest. That adventure was animated by more than a simple reflection of multi-century, anti-Islamic fervor—and with Southern Catholic Europe the old history of the ancient competition between Christianity and Islam implicitly entered the new World.

Yet soon certain Ottoman intellectuals became aware of the existence of the new World, and began to imagine it as the possible future scenario of a new wave of Islamic expansion. Meanwhile, even in Spanish Mexico there were those who looked toward an East situated east of Europe. This was done, for example, by the Mexican chronicler Chimalpahin, a figure who exemplifies a process of cultural hybridization. This process produced both the 'cloning' of Europe in other parts of the world, and the acceleration and intensification of a tendency to *metisage*: a phenomenon which is the key to the deepest understanding of human history as a whole.

However, such a tendency towards *metisage* has always been developed within a well-outlined balance of power. This fact - Gruzinski argues - must always be considered in real terms, avoiding the temptation to see in it, uncritically, an easy way of composing the conflicts that have characterized human history in the past, and continue to do so. Once the 'radically' Eurocentric perspective which has long dominated historiography is set aside, human history is found to be polycentric and entangled. And Gruzinski devotes the most original and surprising part of his book to this theme, investigating the dialectic between polycentrism and hybridization in contemporary society, and in the historical narratives that feed it today.

But in the contemporary world, history is no longer communicated to the public by the professional historians alone. In addition, globally, the power of images has become in many respects more important than that of the written word and of the book (the elements that once constituted the symbol of cultural superiority). As such, a substantial number of the great narratives that connect the public with the historical dimension are produced in non-academic areas; this tends to be a history that 'goes on stage,' and is perceived by its audiences more through the channel of emotion than through reflection and reasoning. Such is the history, for example, made by television networks, with their serial productions about the past; made by the film industry, and further, in a lesser tone, made in other forms of art and entertainment.

In this context, Gruzinski discusses two specific cases that exemplify the current polycentrism of historiographical narratives. The first is that of the films made by Zhang Yimou, beginning with *Red Lanterns* in 1991, and culminating in *Hero* in 2004. Zhang proposes a narrative of China as the center of world history. His works highlight the continuity between past and present (a radiant present and an imperial past), glossing over the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century, or the epochs of decay and submission. By this Zhang aims especially to exalt the recent rediscovery of the ‘perennial’ Confucian soul of Chinese culture, and to indicate in the latter the root of a possible ‘mild’ and peaceful ‘sinocentric’ universalism, one opposed to the aggressive universalism of a Western matrix. This is an interpretation that Zhang proposed to a global audience through his direction of the opening ceremony of the Games of the XXIX Olympiad that were hosted in China in 2008. (The American filmmaker Steven Spielberg withdrew as an adviser as a sign of protest against the violation of human rights in China.) Yet, as an alternative to the Eurocentric master narrative, this Sinocentric tale is not the only historical narrative that has been broadcast through cinema in recent times. Like China, Russia has sought for itself a new place in global history, articulating a tale that emphasizes continuity while tending to remove embarrassing periods from a reassuring reading of national history. Perhaps above all, the Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov has given expression to this approach in the movie *Russian Ark* (2002).

Alongside the theme of nationalistic polycentrism in its relationship with global history, Gruzinski’s book repeatedly addresses the experience of hybridization associated with globalization. Here he leads the reader through very unusual places. For example, he describes a class at a high school in Roubaix, where a brave teacher at a multiethnic school has tried to stage a show created on the basis of materials in *L’Aigle et le Dragon*. The teacher aimed to contribute to building a shared past among his pupils, children whose stories are so diverse and dissonant. A second example is one immortalized in a photograph by Kader Attia, ‘who shows one of the many possible images of the current world: a handful of teenagers playing football in the Algerian countryside. The place? The plains of Aurès, more precisely Tazoult. The scene? A Roman arch that serves as a door to a group of boys who strike the ball’ (p.9). As a third example: the muddy shores of the Tapajos River in Santarém, the second city in the Brazilian state of Pará, where, while waiting to board a boat that will traverse the Rio of the Amazons, the author encounters a peddler who offers for sale a package of copied DVDs of Asian films of the most varied content. All these examples evoke the extraordinary density of the phenomena of hybridization that characterize the contemporary world and its places, each involving a puzzling mixture of different temporalities and spatialities.

Until recently the Eurocentric master narrative has been the core of the historical tale itself, since modern historiography was born in Europe at a time when Europe

dominated the world. The same master narrative is thus incapable of providing convincing answers to the complexities of a global world. Europe has undoubtedly contributed most to the emergence of such a world, but today this world includes an impetuous proliferation of subjects, languages of communication, and agencies, in an entanglement of autonomy and connection. To renew itself, therefore, historiography can no longer avoid matching the newer narrative techniques with new sources—which are today just as important as written sources for their ability to reach an audience much wider than that achieved by academic narratives.

Do we still need history? I believe Gruzinski's book gives an affirmative answer to this question. As such, we must learn to 'do' history that takes into account how deeply the global present has altered the nineteenth-century historical landscape that was the backdrop to the birth of modern historical writing.