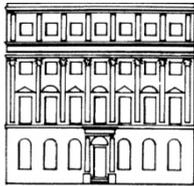


German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Birgit Tremml:
Global History: Connected Histories or a History of Connections?
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 33, No. 2
(November 2011), pp 98-102

Copyright © 2011 German Historical Institute London. All rights reserved.

Global History: Connected Histories or a History of Connections?
Spring school held at the German Historical Institute London, 11-14
Apr. 2011.

In April 2011 the German Historical Institute in London hosted an academic event long anticipated in research circles on global history. Jointly organized by scholars from Heidelberg University and the University of Leipzig, a spring school with the thought-provoking title 'Connected Histories or a History of Connections?' was established as a communication platform for the first generation of historians trained in global history. The workshop brought together Ph.D. students at an advanced stage of their research to discuss their approaches based on comparisons and connections. It therefore served as an ideal introduction to the Third European Congress on World and Global History, and provided a crucial interface between research and teaching.

In an attempt to distinguish between connected histories, where the connection provides the background for findings in order to shed new light on established narratives, and a history of connections, where global connections become the primary object of research (Roland Wenzelhuemer, Heidelberg), students and scholars alike were invited to sharpen their ideas of cross-cultural interactions. Thought-provoking questions and controversial statements on differing practices and diverging opinions challenged our understanding of targets, duties, and methods, and of the future of global history. The large number of trans-disciplinary works, a wide range of topics, and the Ph.D. candidates' different positions in the field further encouraged in-depth discussions.

A recurring debate, initiated by Antje Flüchter (Heidelberg), centred on traditional understandings of periodization and the search for an appropriate starting point for one global world. After lively discussions on revisiting the role of early modern connections that are traditionally under-represented in global history, both early modernists and advocates of a meta-narrative of global history emphasized the importance of pre-nineteenth-century developments for our understanding of globality.

The need for a 'cosmopolitan meta-narrative' of global history intermingled with local elements, as advocated by Patrick O'Brien, was another central topic of debate. It was interesting to note, how-

ever, that the younger generation did not seem particularly worried that a period of pronounced dualism between persistent scholarly critique of a lack of specialization and global history's success as a widely recognized research perspective would give rise to alarming tendencies. It seemed that most of the students were more interested in defining methods and theories than re-visiting problematic terms and concepts. Against this background, the question of whether we still need to re-define global history arose. The commonly held view was that to tap the full potential of global history requires a multitude of approaches to be accepted; only then will it be possible to abandon the intrinsic notion of ethno-centric boundaries.

Although all participants advocated concepts of global history, their approaches differed significantly depending on their academic backgrounds. Thus it should not surprise us that questions about the ambivalent character of global history were not answered to universal satisfaction. What was most striking in this respect was that the discussions and debates hardly ever touched upon the self-inquiries and self-evaluations that had concerned global history researchers in the past. Yet this is not to say that the 'new' generation is unaware of the shortcomings of the developing discipline. In fact, they seemed eager to contribute to gradually building up a global historical meta-narrative by addressing their individual research questions. This seems to herald an empirical turn within the research field, one that promises more monographs based on specific case studies in years to come.

What most of these ambitious projects had in common was a highly empirical framework and often also a multilingual corpus of sources. In terms of specific research interests, social and political aspects of long-distance connections held centre stage while dry economic analyses were almost totally avoided, a development that could be taken as a clear sign of a social, cultural, and political turn in global history. Thus the term 'social history of globalization' was frequently used. Projects such as Lisa Hellman's (Stockholm) work on the social relations of the employees of the multi-ethnic Swedish East India Company in Canton and Macao suggest promising results in this regard. Combined with the methodological search for a global history from below, other research, such as that on capacity building in education policies for the scheduled caste in India (Monika Milowska, Warsaw) and the emergence of a development caste in

Conference Reports

Nepal (Sara Elmer, Zurich) demonstrates that a social history of the local level is indispensable for our understanding of the spread of global knowledge.

Other studies on shifts in the socio-economic field proved stimulating for the conceptualization of the creation of globality. The categories discussed in this context included new zones of interaction and the role of global actors. Anirban Ghosh (Munich) examined the new identities of the Indian circus and raised the question of how to write a global history of these new actors and agencies. With regard to early modern actors and agencies, neutral carriers in a maritime trade environment made two appearances. Strikingly, they played a crucial part in America's trade with India and China, as Lisa Sturm (Frankfurt an der Oder) argued, and they also existed in Manila because of the absence of foreign intermediaries in the Manila trade. This was illustrated by Birgit Tremml (Vienna) in her work on the multi-layered early modern Manila market that challenges state-of-the-art concepts of port cities.

A further noticeable aspect was that contemporary topics held interesting implications for the future of writing global history. With impressive interdisciplinary strength, the research projects of Birte Herrmann (Heidelberg) and Nils Riecken (Berlin) examined the perception and historiography of globality in contemporary China and Morocco respectively. Gerrie Swart's (Stellenbosch) presentation on the intercultural level of the African Union's cooperative security discourse demonstrated an appealing approach.

Strictly speaking, a true global history approach dealing with connected histories or histories of connections was not evident in all research agendas. Often we were given a trans-national study with strong comparative foci instead. This was the case with research on the role of Swiss knowledge in the temperance movement in colonial Africa and Latin America (Soenke Bauck and Francesco Spoering, Zurich), and on the global context of the anti-alcohol movement in Bulgaria by Nikolay Kamenov (Berlin and Zurich). A study of the development of insolvency law (Lea Heimbeck, Frankfurt am Main) in Greece, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, and Venezuela during the nineteenth century, and the mutual influence of Western European constitutional cultures (Christina Reimann, Berlin) both highlighted the phenomenon of a trans-national league active in problem-solving.

To sum up, four innovative fields of research were addressed: (1) a social history of globalization, (2) globalized actors, (3) a global space (that is, port cities), and (4) re-visited time frames. In regard to methodological deepening, the question of how to write a global history from below was raised. So far we can say with some certainty only that economic globalization as the main focus of a final narrative in global history has lost ground. There can be no doubt that we will hear more about these changing research paradigms in the near future. Responding to the explicit rejection of economic history by a number of students, Silke Strickrodt (London) with good reason warned against playing down important implications for the study of global connections that arise out of economic aspects.

A further worthwhile outcome of the discussions, although theoretically still vague, centred on the assumption of a linear process of learning and/or dis-learning in global settings. Based on the question of whether certain political, economic, or social phenomena rooted in the early modern era were interrupted or forgotten, 'disentanglement' emerged as a tempting concept. Given the indisputable fact that global movements disappear, the question of how connections and processes disentangle again in privileged places of cultural exchange will have to be addressed in future. Here it may be worth exploring in a specific setting why cultural skills were lost to the next generation instead of being stored. One hypothetical answer is that they disentangled because they turned global, and were no longer just cross-cultural or trans-national.

Despite the euphoric atmosphere at the workshop, the Ph.D. candidates were reminded of pointless reinventions of approaches and advised to think twice before they labelled their findings as 'different' or 'new'. In his final comments, Arndt Brendecke (Berne) sounded a note of caution on dead-end battles about the exclusiveness of a certain period, technique, or movement in history. Instead he suggested focusing on our most important ability as global historians, namely, explaining *longue durée* developments. Hence we could say, ironically, that the sometimes desperate search for better theories and methods has taken us back to where we started from: the history of connections.

In discussing the difficulties of writing an integrative global history on everything that happened, Matthias Middell (Leipzig) hinted at the pitfalls of current projects in which everything is lumped

Conference Reports

together. Arguing against conceptually and empirically weak syntheses in global history, he called for future Ph.D. research in the field to fill these gaps. As alternative approaches, he suggested addressing a manageable narrative, as proposed by Michael Geyer in a 1995 article in the *American Historical Review*, or, alternatively, looking at specific actors and their concrete intentions when connecting the world via social networks.

Taken as a whole, this pilot project has major potential for the future, offering Ph.D. students at an advanced stage of their research the chance to reflect on their projects and to solve difficult problems such as factual misunderstandings and theoretical uncertainties. These often remain unaddressed whilst students are doing research at their home institutions. My personal impression was that as the spring school, unlike almost every other academic gathering, offered ample time for discussion, it was rewarding for participants and the research field alike. Given this, the organizers deserve praise for the initiative and their constant endeavours to create a constructive atmosphere.

The event ended with a particularly illuminating representation of influential historical connections for the world as we know it today. An excursion to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich brought the participants into direct contact with an invention that resulted in a globalizing phenomenon beyond comparison: the Prime Meridian as the centre of world time.

BIRGIT TREMML (Institute of Economic and Social History,
University of Vienna).