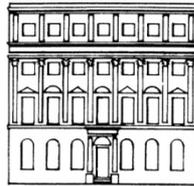


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Debarati Bagchi:

*Panel Discussion: The Languages of Global History*

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Panel Discussion on *The Languages of Global History*, held at the India International Centre, New Delhi, on 18 Feb. 2020, 6.30–8 p.m. Panellists: Felix Brahm (GHIL); Monica Juneja (Heidelberg University); Joachim Kurtz (Heidelberg University); Dhruv Raina (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi); and Rekha Vaidya Rajan (Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, Hyderabad). Chair and Moderator: Neeladri Bhattacharya (New Delhi)

A panel discussion on *The Languages of Global History* took place on the evening of the second day of the Winter School. Neeladri Bhattacharya opened the discussion by briefly reflecting on the historical trajectory of the 'global turn' in history writing. The first speaker, Felix Brahm, pointed out at the very outset that the selection of terms and concepts was one of the most crucial challenges of doing global history. He highlighted that global historians had a clear preference for all things connected, which is reflected in their lavish use of the terms 'connections' and 'entanglements'. Brahm argued that global history addressed various kinds of relations and thus it was a challenge to decide which metaphor would capture a particular relationship when deployed on a transnational and transcultural scale. He used the example of the term 'commodity chain' to illustrate his argument, questioning whether it could be used to understand production relations on a global scale.

The second speaker, Monica Juneja, discussed the usefulness of certain global history concepts in art history. She emphasized the need to give up the myth of 'origins' and look more into the processes of transculturation: how concepts travel, take root in other cultures, and are reappropriated. She emphasized that transculturation as a concept could enable art historians in South Asia to engage with the pressing contemporary issue of a globally connected field of art, and also with the metropolitan gallery spaces that turn objects into museumized art. It could also help art historians to understand the transactions between textual and artistic practices.

The third panellist, Rekha Vaidya Rajan, addressed the subject from the perspective of German literary studies. She reflected on the possible intersections between literary and cultural studies on the one hand, and the methods of global history on the other. Given Germany's short colonial history, German literature followed a very different trajectory from its British or French counterparts, and so-

called 'postcolonial literature' never became a part of German literature. From the 1970s onwards, works by authors who were migrants in Germany started being published. The language of the establishment, through various exclusionary categories such as 'literature by guest authors', 'literature of the foreigners', or 'literature of the migrants', tended to keep these transcultural works outside the pale of German literature. Rajan argued that this transcultural literature brought about a qualitative change in the literary landscape of Germany as it questioned the homogeneity of German culture.

Dhruv Raina focused on the rise of the concept of 'indigenous sciences' in the 1980s and how that eventually led to an interest in 'indigenous knowledge' as a subject of postcolonial science studies. The 1980s saw the conjuncture of post-Kuhnian science, postcolonial science studies, feminist philosophies, and the attempt to deconstruct positivist science. Postcolonial science studies in India and China, for instance, started to focus on 'alternatives' to the universalist notion of the 'indigenous'. Raina also highlighted that this epistemological shift went hand in hand with certain shifts in the discourses of institutions like UNESCO, a key player in the mainstreaming of the 'indigenous'. He concluded with the thought that in times of global environmental crisis and diminishing returns, science studies needs to reimagine its analytical language.

The final speaker of the panel, Joachim Kurtz, discussed the writing of global history in East Asian languages. He spoke about how these languages have often challenged the hegemony of Western languages and used terms that are specific to their cultural sensibilities. He cited the example of a Chinese word that connotes 'all under heaven', which is increasingly being used in Chinese international relations to refer to ancient Chinese civilization. There is another school in Chinese studies that advocates the complete rejection of Western languages and a return to indigenous languages and vocabularies in order to write the histories of non-Western civilizations. However, Kurtz argued, the real challenge lay in conceptualizing a methodology that could make all sorts of meaning-making processes accessible under the rubric of global history. Both Rajan's and Kurtz's presentations raised important questions concerning the idea of 'translation' in the field of global history.

Afterwards, Neeladri Bhattacharya teased out the tropes and categories that the five panellists associated with the practice of global

## CONFERENCE REPORTS

history, and highlighted how their papers creatively spoke to each other. To conclude, he emphasized the necessity of reversing the lens and focusing on the 'local', without which it would be impossible to imagine the constitution of the global. The presentations were followed by a lively discussion with the audience.

DEBARATI BAGCHI (MWS IBO, New Delhi)

### *Panel on The Languages of Global History*



Panellists (L-R): Neeladri Bhattacharya (Delhi, Chair), Felix Brahm (London), Monica Juneja (Heidelberg), Rekha Vaidya Rajan (Hyderabad), Dhruv Raina (Delhi), and Joachim Kurtz (Heidelberg)

*Credits:* Indra Sengupta