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Comparing Global History to World History

The historical profession has been slow to appreciate the importance of globalization. One reason appears to be the confusion caused by the claims of world history, which has been struggling to achieve its own identity. In its fight against more traditional, national approaches, world history has generally seen global history—that is, the study of globalization—as a dilution of its challenge to the establishment. Hence, world historians have tended either to ignore the new global history or to claim that it is already encompassed by what they are doing. Is their response legitimate? What exactly is world history? And what is global history?

WORLD HISTORY

World history has accumulated a number of definitions, most of them reflecting different schools of thought. The "Invitation to Membership" of the World History Association (WHA) begins with the statement, "If you teach the whole history of the whole world in nine short months, you know the challenge of planning and organizing a meaningful course in world history." Although adherents of the WHA often deny it, the implication *seems* to be that world history is "the whole history of the whole world," thus offering no obvious principle of selection.¹

Bentley, the editor of *The Journal of World History*, recently deceased, gives a more limited definition: "My impression is that most participants in the discussion [about the definition of world history] took interactions between peoples participating in large-scale historical processes to be one of the principal concerns of world history." This conception of world history is also vague. For example, would every historian of the Industrial Revolution (even if restricted to one country) -surely, a large-scale historical process-

¹ "Invitation to Membership" was an undated mailing from Richard Rosen, executive director of the WHA.

necessarily be a world historian as well, and if not, why not? Bentley continues, "Thus, world history represents (among other things) a dialogue between the past and the present, in that it seeks to establish a historical context for the integrated and interdependent world of modern times."²

McNeill is the premier figure of modern world history. He follows, by his own admission, directly in the line of Arnold Toynbee, who inspired him with an ecumenical vision. But McNeill translated this vision into more mundane historical practice. His *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, 1976) is intellectual worlds removed from Toynbee's *Study of History* (New York, 1933-1954), 10 v. However, although, like Toynbee, McNeill takes civilizations as his framework of analysis, he does not construe them as hermetically closed but as open to cultural borrowings.

Ralph Linton and Robert Redfield—anthropologists—also influenced McNeill. From them came his interest in "trans-civilizational encounters," which have shaped his definition of world history as the study of "interaction among peoples of diverse cultures." Long-distance trade, the spread of religions and plagues, and a multitude of other trans-civilizational factors have prominent places in McNeill's world history. These concerns are always informed by a biological and ecological awareness that has no precedent in Toynbee's work. Without specifically invoking the theory of evolution, McNeill lives and writes in its environment. The results have been brilliant treatments of processes occurring on a worldwide scale, such as the spread of disease or the emergence of military power.³

Other variants of world history exist alongside McNeill's version. The crucial variable is the definition of *world*. Fernand Braudel seemed to have abandoned his fascination with civilizations in favor of "world systems"—that is, worlds constructed by

2 Jerry Bentley, review of Mazlish and Ralph Huultjens (eds.), *Conceptualizing Global History* (Boulder, 1993), H-NET Book Review (August 1995), 1. Of special interest concerning the topic at hand are the chapters in *Conceptualizing Global History* by Wolf Schafer—"Global History: Historiographic Feasibility and Environmental Reality," 47-69—and Manfred Kossok—"From Universal History to Global History," 93-111.

3 William H. McNeill, "The Changing Shape of World History," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 34, "World Historians and Their Critics," 14.

trade and culture. Characteristically, his book, *The Mediterranean* (trans. Siaan Reynolds) (New York, 1972) carries the subtitle, *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.

Braudel's disciple, Wallerstein, in *The Modern World-System* (New York, 1976), shows in great detail how the modern commercial and capitalist world came into existence. In similar accounts, of course, Columbus' voyage occupies a central place, adding a New World to an Old one. Wallerstein's emphasis in the second volume is on the seventeenth-century mercantile competition among the Western European nations. His is history in the grand style, but with its feet on the ground (or, perhaps one should say, in the sea).⁴

Carrying the world-system approach even further back in time, Abu-Lughod has suggestively argued for an earlier "system of world trade and even 'cultural' exchange." She finds such a system in the period 1250-1350 A.D., which she designates as a "crucial turning point in history." Though lacking an international division of labor, her system connects disparate areas of the world—Europe, India, and China—through trade between key cities. Applying this approach to even earlier periods, she speaks of the Roman Empire as the "first nascent world system."⁵

What all these variants on world history—McNeill's, Braudel's, Wallerstein's, and Abu-Lughod's—share is a concern with systemic processes and patterns among a wide variety of historical and natural phenomena that affected diverse populations. Compared with earlier ecumenical histories, they are less keen about making predictions, and about tracing the course of civilizations through fixed cycles. In addition, though forced to rely heavily on secondary accounts, they stay close to the scholarship of ordinary historians, offering strictly secular accounts (even of religion). In short, these accounts are serious attempts to treat historical phenomena that arise on a world scale. And it is at this point that the meaning of the term "world" becomes especially

4 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System. II. Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy, 1600-1750* (New York, 1980).

5 Janet Lipman Abu-Lughod, "The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor?" American Historical Association (Washington, D.C. [no date]), 2, 6. See also *idem*, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York, 1989).

crucial. It is the point at which a possible transition to global history occurs.⁶

GLOBAL HISTORY As with the competing definitions of world history, obfuscation also enters into the differences between world and global history. In the foreword to a series edited for the American Historical Association- "Essays on Global and Comparative History" Adas announced a "'new' global or world history" which differs in fundamental ways from its predecessors. That difference, for Adas, led to virtually a paraphrase of McNeill's version. Adas' series included not only an account of Abu-Lughod's thirteenth-century world system, but also such essays as "The Columbian Voyages" and "Gender and Islamic History." It offered serious and worthwhile contributions to world history but unthinkingly misappropriated the title "Global History," which needed to be defined afresh in its own proper terms. Even McNeill realized that something unprecedented was in the works, commenting, "I suspect that human affairs are trembling on the verge of a far-reaching transformation," which he compared to the importance of the agricultural revolution.⁷

We encounter the same intuition in an important article by Geyer and Bright, the very title of which, "World History in a Global Age," indicated the tenuous transition taking place. In their words,

What we have before us as contemporary history grates against the familiar explanatory strategies and analytic categories with which scholars have traditionally worked. . . . This is a crisis, above all, of Western imaginings, but it poses profound challenges for any historian: the world we live in has come into its own as an

6 Despite their general disinclination to make predictions, a number of world historians have activist interests. McNeill, for one, is concerned with environmental trends, and Wallerstein's Marxist inclinations implicitly push him in a predictive direction.

7 See, for example, Michael Adas, foreword to Abu-Lughod, "The World System in the Thirteenth Century," vii. McNeill, "Changing Shape of World History," 25. This is a recent comment; as I interpret it, contextually, McNeill is talking about the need for a new definition of world or global history rather than about one of his previous "transmutations."

McNeill was a participant at the first international conference on global history in Bellatçio, Italy, 1991. Though, at the time, he denied any difference between world and global history, what others said may have influenced him. Others may find this inference hazardous, but I hold to it, based on personal acquaintance.

integrated globe, yet it lacks narration and has no history. . . . The central challenge of a renewed world history at the end of the twentieth century is to narrate the world's past in an age of globality.⁸

Our "imaginings" must leap from world history to global history. In making this jump, a look at the etymology of the words, *world* and *globe*, is helpful. Words are *not* just what individuals say they mean; they have a historical nature. *World* comes from the Middle English for "human existence"; its central reference is to the earth, including everyone and everything on it. Worlds can also be imaginary, such as the "next world," meaning life after death, or they can designate a class of persons—the academic world, for instance. For many, the discovery of the New World marked the advent of world history. More recently, a first, a second, and a third world have been discerned, demarcating different levels of development.

Such usage ill accords with the term *global* (one cannot substitute New Globe for New World in 1492, or third globe for third world today). It occupies a different valence, deriving from the Latin, *globus*, the first definition of which is "something spherical or rounded," like a "heavenly body." Only secondarily does the dictionary offer the synonym, *earth*. *Global* thus points in the direction of space; its sense permits the notion of standing outside our planet and seeing "Spaceship Earth." (Incidentally, *earth* is a misnomer for our planet; as is evident from outer space, our abode is more water than earth.) This new perspective is one of the keys to global history.

What are the other keys? These we can determine by dividing the definition of global history into two parts. The first focuses on the history of globalization; that is, it takes existing processes, encapsulated in the "factors of globalization," and traces them as far back in the past as seems necessary and useful. The second signifies processes that are best studied on a global, rather than a local, a national, or a regional, level. The second definition is a continuation of much that is to be encountered in McNeill's variation of world history, except that it begins in the present, openly acknowledging its informed global perspective.

8 Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "World History in a Global Age," *American Historical Review*, C (1995), 1037, ro4r.

The first part of the definition-the history of globalization- is both the heart and the novelty of global history, deciding the initial field of study and raising the questions, What is involved in globalization? and What are the factors at work in our contemporary "world"? An early attempt to answer them stated,

The starting point for global history lies in the following basic facts of our time (although others could be added): our thrust into space, imposing upon us an increasing sense of being in one world- "Spaceship Earth"-as seen from outside the earth's atmosphere; satellites in outer space that link the peoples of the earth in an unprecedented fashion; nuclear threats in the form of either weapons or utility plants, showing how the territorial state can no longer adequately protect its citizens from either military or ecologically related "invasions"; environmental problems that refuse to conform to lines drawn on a map; and multinational corporations that increasingly dominate our economic lives.⁹

Among other "basic facts of our time" that could be added to this list are global consumerism (obviously related to multinationals), human rights, the displacement of an international political system by a global one (the Geyer-Bright article cited earlier is especially strong in this regard), the globalization of culture (especially music, as fostered by satellite communications), and so forth. What is essential to note is the synergy and synchronicity of these various factors-their unprecedented interaction with one another, in ever-increasing extent and force, notwithstanding the origin of them all in a differentiated past. Globalization is the sum of their combined presences. It is a reality that now affects every part of the globe and every person on it, even though in widely differing local contexts. In fact, one could say that much of global history has necessarily to devote itself to studying the factors of globalization in relation to a "local" reality, which can take many forms.

The practitioners of global history-as in, say, artificial-intelligence studies-include adherents of both a strong and a weak interpretation. The former are convinced that globalization is ushering in a new global *epoch*, which replaces existing attempts to construct such periods as the postmodern or the postindustrial.

9 Mazlish, "An Introduction to Global History," in *idem* and Bultjens (eds.), *Conceptualizing Global History*, 1-2.

The adherents of the weak interpretation abstain from divisionary schemes, and are content to study the globalization process without further claims. For those who see globalization as introducing a new period, the issue of when the global epoch "began" is worth considerable attention (analogous to the issue of when modern history began). Some opt for the 1950s and others for the 1970s (I place myself in the epochal camp, and opt for the later time; more on this in what follows). This argument turns on the question of when enough synergy and synchronicity arises to justify the launch of a new periodization.

Behind this argument is a conviction that time and space have been compressed in an unprecedented fashion. The roots of this compression reach far into the past. The development of sea vessels, from sail to steam, cutting distance and duration, forms one thread in this account. The invention of the telegraph, the laying of cables, the introduction of the telephone, and then of radio communication represent another wave of enormous changes. Now, satellites, with the aid of computer linkages, allow simultaneous communication between any spots on the globe—1 billion people watched the first step on the moon on their television sets—and they can go from one end of the globe to the other in less than a day. It should also be noted that with globalization has come the adoption of a uniform calendar.¹⁰

Another major thread to follow is mapping. Since the fifteenth century, Ptolemaic maps have guided the opening of a new world, in which half of a previously unknown globe spun into perspective. Yet, forgotten in this burst of vision was the fact that large areas of that globe were still "dark." Parts of Africa remained unmapped until the end of the nineteenth century, and the poles were not adequately explored until recent expeditions. Only in our time has the globe come to be more or less fully known (including the depths of its seas). We have even seen it from outside, as one of many spherical bodies in space. Our map of the globe must now take its place as part of the mapping of outer space.

Such brief investigations into some of the elements that enter into the factors of globalization indicate how they are rooted in the past. After all, global history *is* a historical inquiry, although

¹⁰ Mazlish, "Introduction," in *idem* and Buultjens (eds.), *Conceptualizing Global History*, 17-20. More than 3 billion people are said to have seen the Coca-Cola commercials that accompanied the last Olympic games on television.

its starting point is unabashedly close to the present, newly identified as a global epoch. The accounts of global historians are heavily tinged by scientific, technological, and economic "happenings" of recent times. Whether or not one approves of these happenings, global history, as the study of "Wie es eigentlich gewesen," must inquire into them.

The emergence of globalization was not simply a matter of science, technology, and economics; political developments were also requisite. First, the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States in space was essential for the creation of our increasingly satellite-dependent world, with its attendant communications revolution. Furthermore, the decline of communism eroded the old political-ideological divisions, leaving the way open for a genuinely global society, in which all countries can and must participate, though differentially.

Modernization was primarily a Western imposition. Some see globalization in similar terms. In fact, they see it as "Americanization." Others, including myself, see globalization, as a global process in which numerous participants are creating a new "civilization," to borrow the term from the world historians (for better or for worse). For example, Germany and Russia, not to mention the European Community, are major contributors; Japan has become almost as powerful as the United States; Indonesia, Malaysia, and Australia, are starting to make their presence felt; and China and India are looming increasingly on the horizon.¹¹

Needless to say, the course of this globalization is not fore-ordained: Global history is not Whiggish. Or, more to the point, the shape it will take cannot be predicted. Like most historians, global historians are aware of the contingency and uncertainty of human affairs; they are not practicing ecumenical history. Nor are they practicing world history in the primitive sense of "The whole history of the whole world." Rather, global historians, or at least historians of globalization, are trying to establish a more deliberate research agenda. They know that each of the factors of globalization requires rigorous empirical study, and that new actors will increasingly occupy the center of the historical stage-non-

11 The demise of the Soviet Union must be seen in a global context. As Charles S. Maier wrote, "The Communist collapse was a reaction to forces for transformation that have gripped West and East alike, but which Western Europeans (and North Americans) had responded to earlier and thus with less cataclysmic an upheaval" ("The Collapse of Communism: Approaches for a Future History," *History Workshop*, XXXVIII [1991], 34-59).

governmental organizations (NGOs)--such as human-rights and environmental groups, along with other third-sector organizations; multinationals, which are almost equivalent in importance to nation-states (of the 100 entities possessing the largest gross domestic products (GDPs), forty-nine are multinationals); and the United Nations (uN), in all its aspects, but especially its nascent military role.

Although global history is mainly transnational in its subjects of study, it would be a grave error to neglect the study of the nation as well. National history merits reexamination in light of how the forces of globalization have affected the nation-state, and vice-versa. Nations will not be going away. They are still the preferred settings for large numbers of people to organize in behalf of common ends--protection of territory and property, economic production, and--last but not least--group identity. The literature on the subject is vast. In short, global history, though it seeks to transcend national history, is engaged nevertheless with the nation-state as a major actor on the international and global scene.

The main focus of world history, as opposed to global history, has been civilizations. But as global historians are well aware, civilizations do not send up rockets, operate television networks, or organize a global division of labor. Empires, the carriers of civilizations in the past, are no more; they have been replaced by nation-states (more than 180 as of this writing and counting). Hence, global history examines the processes that transcend the nation-state framework (in the process, abandoning the centuries-old division between civilized and uncivilized, and ourselves and the "other"; "barbarians," that is, inferior peoples, no longer figure in global history, only momentarily less developed peoples).¹²

Global history is still an emerging project with many aspects to study. Does it make sense, for example, to talk about a developing global identity? Remember that before America became the United States, the original settlers had a colonial identity that was

¹² Samuel Huntington's notion of an apocalyptic clash between Islam and the West in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking Of the World Order* (New York, 1996) is a recent and ill-informed attempt to view history in terms of civilization. A notion of the conflict between civilizations is also current in Russia, where it takes the form of a long-standing "Eurasian" ideology, which has been embraced by many nationalist/communist opponents of Boris Yeltsin and others perceived as "reformers."

only gradually supplemented, and perhaps eventually replaced, by a national one. Can the same process occur with a global identity (even though it would be unattached to a world government, which for the foreseeable future appears utopian or even dystopian)? After all, people are connected today *in actuality* in a way that was only previously dreamt of in a vague aspiration to "humanity." Will people's sense of themselves begin to approximate their true situation? And will historians of global history be forced to reappraise *their* identifications, that is, their unconscious national attachments and perspectives?¹³

We could go on to say much more about various facets of global history, but, hopefully, enough has been sketched so as to support the assertion that it embodies a new consciousness, a new perspective—heavily involved with the work of science and technology that has allowed us to view our planet from space, while also highlighting our earth's evolutionary and ecological nature—that separates it from previous endeavors, for example, in world history. Exactly how it will play out in empirical research will be apparent only in the work of future global historians.¹⁴

Historians, by trade and tradition, are generally suspicious of theory. In global history, however, theoretical considerations, emanating from the social as well as the natural sciences, are indispensable to particular inquiries. Historians are also distrustful of or indifferent to work done in other disciplines. In global history, multi- or interdisciplinary orientations move front and center. The very notion of globalization came from sociology. Future work will have to engage economists, economic historians, political scientists, and historians alike.

Words do matter in this case because they determine how we conceive of the work in which we are engaged. Of course,

8 For the problem of a developing global identity, see Mazlish, "Psychohistory and the Question of Global Identity," *Psychohistory Review*, XXV (1997), 165-176.

14 Some indications of global history's direction are already apparent. Four international conferences have taken place. The first conference, "Conceptualizing Global History," already cited, was held in Bellagio, in 1991 (see Mazlish and Buulrjens (eds.), *Conceptualizing Global History*); the second, "Global Civilization and Local Culture," in Darmstadt, Germany, in 1992; the third, "Global History and Migrations," in Hong Kong in 1994 (see Wang Gungwu (ed.), *Global History and Migrations* [Boulder, 1996]); and the fourth, "Food in Global History," in Ann Arbor, in 1996 (see Raymond Grew [ed.], *Food in Global History* [Boulder, forthcoming]). Future conferences on "Global History and the Cities" and "Mapping the Multinational Corporations" are also in the offing.

arbitrary definitions can be attached to the terms *world* and *global* history. And however we define them, ambiguity will cling to these terms, as well as overlaps. Still, if work is to go forward effectively, it is essential that we also be as clear as possible about the differences. There is space enough for world history to operate without taking an "imperial" turn to encompass global history in its domain. Greater definitional precision will allow each subfield of history, the world and the global, to flourish independently. Although world history and global history exist on a continuum, we must realize that we cross a significant boundary when we enter upon the history of globalization, or, more succinctly, global history.

(2)

In the past few decades, studies in and of globalization have expanded exponentially. It should be noted before we continue that major strides have been taken in the field of transnational history. Though still operating in a nation-state framework, the practitioners of transnational history have taken a cosmopolitan viewpoint. Foremost in this regard has been the work of Akira Iriye and Rana Mitter, along with that of Pierre Yves-Saunier.¹

Similar strides have been made in world history. Led by Jerry Bentley (now, alas, deceased) and his *Journal of World History*, the field is well represented in courses (both at the high school and university level). Partly, this is because anyone can teach it; Africanists as well as Americanists. Partly, of course, because it correlates with the desire to go beyond eurocentrism. Among its present leaders are Patrick Manning.

Returning to global history and new global history, the question of periodization looms large. When does increased interconnection and interdependence occur so as to justify the new rubric? My own position is that a rupture takes place after WW II. It was Karl Jaspers who first realized that that war marked an axial period. As he said, "It was the Second World War which first accorded full weight to the contribution from everywhere, to the globe as a whole. The war in the Far East was just as serious as that in Europe. It was in point of fact the first real world war."²

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² Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, quoted in Martin Albrow, *The Global Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 75.

Add to this fact the explosion of the first nuclear bomb in 1945 at Hiroshima, and we have another factor making for globalization—no territorial borders are secure. Further technological developments—especially the launching of satellites and the spread of personal computers—make for an unprecedented increase in interconnectivity and interdependence.

At the same time, the challenges to Humanity have become increasingly global, for example, in the form of climate change or ecological exhaustion. Unfortunately, global institutions to deal with them are sadly lacking. In this regard, we are still in the nation-state era.

One of the prerequisites for dealing with global problems is the development of an increased sense of Humanity as a common identity, adding to that of our local, tribal and national identities. In a path-breaking article, “Panathropoi. Toward a Society of All Humanity “ (Globality Studies Journal. Issue 59, Vol. 20123), the sociologist Martha Van Der Bly puts forward the thesis that, owing to the human propensity to cross boundaries and to explore, the move to abolish the differences between “us and them” is inexorable though not inevitable.

Such a “global identity,” of course, is heavily dependent on the education we give people around the world. Until now, history has been mainly in the service of the nation-state, instilling patriotism. With global history, we face another possibility. Such progress will be slow—but, with good will, sure. It can be fostered by empirical studies of developing global consciousness. Is it or is it not occurring? How and where?

Much of what will happen in this regard depends on the education imparted to students. World History has been a step forward in this regard. Global and New Global History go further. A foundational text studying how this is happening world wide is “Global Perspectives on Global History” (Cambridge, 2011) by Dominic Sachsenmaier. The author, fluent in his native German, but also in English and Chinese, is almost uniquely prepared to cope with his task and the extensive literature now available.³

History is really not only about the past. It is part and parcel of the present and future. Humans have been gifted with the ability to look behind, at the moment, and toward the future. It is this time sense that helps distinguish Homo sapiens from other species. It is through education that a global consciousness can begin to take shape. Let us be very conscious of this fact as we go about our mundane work as

³ A comparable attempt can be found in the encyclopedia compiled by Daniel Woolf.

historians.