

“On history Becoming History: The Case of World and New Global History”

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Abstract: *Starting from the difference between history, in the sense of happenings, and History, as a conscious effort to reconstruct and understand past happenings, the attempt is made to look at two particular examples of how history becomes History: World History and New Global History. The development of World History after the two World Wars is sketched, and a brief account given of the approaches used by William McNeill and his adherents and by world systems theorists. The differences between World History and a recent initiative, New Global History, are then accentuated, and a short account given as to the nature of the latter and its achievements, stressing, for example, its “outer space” perspective, the role of satellite communications, and the synergy and synchronicity of its various elements. The process of globalization, which has provoked the rise of New Global History, it is then argued, is also changing the way in which we do “History.”*

Key Words: *history, History, World History, Global History, New Global History, historiography, McNeill, Wallerstein, world-systems theory.*

It is common knowledge that history has two meanings: one is that all people have a past, i.e., a history (small h) in the sense of happenings; the other is that History (capital H) is a conscious construction, or reconstruction, of memories and evidences in regard to a people’s happenings in the past. The latter definition, which is the one I shall be mainly concerned with here, goes back perhaps 3-4000 years to Chinese and Indian accounts in the form of dynastic records and chronologies, but takes on what we can call “scientific” form with fifth-century Athens and especially the work of Herodotus and Thucydides.

In the present article, I want to look at how two cases, World and New Global History, moved from being merely history to being History as such. As part of this examination, I want also to scrutinize the relations between the two fields, paying attention to their similarities and differences.

The happening that may be said to constitute the beginning of what would eventually become World history can be located in the New World discoveries of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries. The intellectual effort to understand that happening, however, and to make it a subject of History, actually only comes about in the twentieth century. In order to understand how this could be, we need to go back in the past. As already indicated, History as a form of inquiry only dates back a couple of thousand years. Contemporaries of Herodotus at the time did practice, under that rubric, what they called “universal history.” Indeed, one scholar says of Herodotus himself that he “passed beyond chronicle to both reasoned historical narrative and to a ‘universal’ history,

extending outside Hellas to the known world.”¹ When looked at closely, of course, such History simply meant a more-than-Greek History, wherein other parts of the world known to the Greek historians could be included. In short, it was “universal” only in name and in terms of a restricted world that some Greeks had experienced.

Universal History in a broader sense emerged with the advent of Christianity, and its ecumenical claims. At first, it was merely implicit, for the Roman Empire first continued the form and aspirations of Greek History, though with an expanded reality. Then, in the middle ages, a hiatus occurred, as the aspiration to History descended into a contentment with merely writing chronicles. Thus, with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, History as such had also fallen into decline. Only at the time of the renaissance did History resume its development.

It is in this context that the New World discoveries took place. Particular Histories were now written, for example, about the Indies, or the colonists in Santa Domingo. Universal Histories were again also on display, but almost always with a distinctly eschatological flavor. As I remark elsewhere, such Histories claim to be universal because they assume that “all human activity is under one guiding principle and can be told as one story. Thus, Bossuet wrote his *Discourse on Universal History*, though enormous parts of the globe were unknown to him. The guiding principle, in his case, was Providence, or God.”²

Needless to say, I have collapsed an enormous historiographic account in what I have just recounted. As we know, secular versions of universal and eschatological History soon followed, often in the form of philosophy of history. Though, as in Hegel, the term “World History” is used, we must not be misled into thinking that that is what is meant in today’s practice of something called World History. Our present usage, though connected with the past, stems from different experiences—happenings in history—that cry out for understanding in terms of History, in this case, World History, which can successfully subsume, as well, the centuries of previous Western expansion.

Once more collapsing a complicated story, I would argue that World Wars I and II are the key causal episodes, along with the loss of intellectual and political dominion of the West over other parts of the world. The wars experientially expanded the actuality of the world, bringing more and more parts of the globe into greater and greater contact. The loss of dominion brought with it a questioning of the notion of eurocentrism, which now, further under attack by postcolonial and multicultural forces, became an attitude to be

¹ K. H. Waters, *Herodotus the Historian* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 175. This is a superb book on its subject; yet, Waters’ work has not received the attention it deserves. Another book that has strongly influenced me is M. I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1975), especially the chapter on “Myth, Memory and History.” A sentence that especially has stayed with me comes from Finley’s explanation of the shift from myth to history: “The idea had arisen, and had been nurtured, that society was bound to its past, and up to a point could be understood from its past, in ways which differed from the old ways of myth.” (32)

² This quote is from my article, “Ecumenical, World, and Global History,” in *World History*, ed. Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, Richard T. Vann (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 42.

avoided. The combined result of the two factors has been a rise of what we have come anew to call World History.

After World War II and the collapse of empire, what formerly, especially in the United States, was called a course in History of Western Civilization was now criticized as being too narrow and parochial. The initial result was to add sections on Asia, Africa, or wherever, in order to avoid the charge of eurocentrism. Such patchwork is still often what passes for World History in many educational institutions, especially on the high school level.

More serious efforts took place on a higher level. An outstanding pioneer in this regard is William McNeill. He undertook studies, not only of the rise of the West, but of plagues, population movements, and other happenings that were characterized by peoples interacting across borders. His inspiration was Arnold Toynbee, but McNeill rose above the latter's ecumenical and partly eschatological philosophy of history by casting his World History in detailed and specific investigations and narrations.

Others, such as Leften S. Stavrianos, joined him in this effort. Intellectually structuring the field, they then tried to encourage its institutionalization.³ Slowly but surely they have built up the accoutrements of a new part of the discipline of History: a World History Association, a Journal of World History, a few graduate programs, course offerings at both the graduate and undergraduate level, sessions at the professional meetings, and so forth. At this point, they seem to have crossed over into a critical mass of practitioners, publications, and students.

A similar tale could be told about other variants of World History. Most prominent among them is world-systems analysis, as enunciated by Immanuel Wallerstein and his followers. Inspired by the great Fernand Braudel, they, too, have constructed an intellectual framework and then built institutional supports around it. Looking at the modern world as a system, established around Western capitalist expansion, which replaced the feudal system, Wallerstein, for example, has analyzed it in terms of core and periphery and focussed his account on the way in which the new system has "geographically expanded to cover the entire globe."⁴ His followers have pushed world-systems analysis as an explanatory device back into understanding the middle ages, and forward into the present. It is an alternative form of World History to that advocated by McNeill and his disciples.

Under whatever form, World History has established itself as an on-going enterprise, and produced some outstanding works. As with any other approach, there are drawbacks. World History as practiced by the followers of McNeill, is in the awkward

³ For a full account of this particular effort, see Gilbert Allardyce, "Toward World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course", *Journal of World History*, Vol I. No I. Spring 1990, 23-76.

⁴ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II. Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 8. For me, this is Wallerstein's best work, in which the data is not yet overwhelmed by the theory.

position, for example, of not really having a principle of selectivity. As a result, courses in the subject are often a pastiche, made up of bits and pieces of research into various parts of the world and stitched together in hit or miss fashion. World systems analysis errs in the opposite direction. Influenced by Wallerstein's Marxist inclinations, for example, it tends to be rigid, doctrinaire and Procrustean in its practice. Its selectivity is all too often ideologically determined, and its focus overly economic.

Such broad brush criticisms, however, should not be allowed to obscure the real achievements made under the heading of World History, in all of its forms. Although still dogged by an unacknowledged eurocentrism, it has made significant strides in emancipating itself from that starting point. For my purposes, however, what I have wanted to emphasize in this brief account is how world history became World History. Experiences that made up the existential life of peoples were lifted into another plane by being made into History, in this case World History. To do this, intellectual and institutional efforts had to be made. And made to succeed, as in fact they have.

(2)

As we move toward a consideration of what I shall be calling the New Global History, I believe it is critical to look more closely at what is contained in the word "world." We can then see how it differs significantly from "global." The first thing to be said is that the "world" is not a given. It is something we perceive. Though we can assume a reality behind the word "world", we can only glimpse what that reality is by our construction of it. Such a construction is both social and complex. It is also historically developed over time. The "world" of the hunter-gatherer is not the same "world" as that of a second-century BC Chinese official, a twelfth-century A. D. medieval cleric, a fifteenth-century Renaissance scholar, or a twentieth-century scientist. Nor should it be for a twenty-first-century historian.

Yet, in aspiring to do "World History," historians frequently seem to give insufficient attention to this central aspect of their subject. When the sixteenth-century [?] English poet, Robert Herrick, has his love-sick swain sigh, "if we but had world enough and time....", the world envisaged is the recently expanded *mapa mundi* containing the New World continent. When, before him, Dante has Vergil conduct a tour of the infernal regions, they, in contrast, are situated in a "world" that rises through purgatory to God, and on the way back to hell through the pre-Mercator projections—or rather lack of them—of the mundane regions, on which the continent to the West is unmarked.

These are mere examples to illustrate the general point. Innumerable societies, over time, have had different conceptions of the "world." And, over time, their conceptions have changed. Histories of such conceptions and their changes would be of value. But more important is the constant awareness that "worlds" are invented, as well as discovered; and that in doing "World History" we must be attentive to this fact. In a "world" that is increasingly becoming "global" as well, we can for the first time, perhaps, be conscious of our own world-transforming capacities.

(3)

In turning to New Global History per se, we must tackle a few preliminary problems. One involves the fact that World History practitioners sometimes like to refer to their work also as Global History, using the latter as a synonym for World. I think this obfuscates the differences between the two, and represents more an imperialistic claim than a well-thought out analytic position. But it is by now established, for better or worse, in much ordinary usage. For that reason, a number of us involved in the new initiative with which I am dealing in this article have come to use the rubric New Global History, after having originally started our work under the rubric of Global History.

With this fact in mind, we must cultivate an awareness of the shifting meanings attached to the key word, global. To begin with, the valence of “global” differs from that of “world.” Whereas the latter derives from the Middle English for “human existence” and has as its central reference the earth, the former comes from the Latin, *globus*, and is defined as “something spherical or rounded,” like a “heavenly body.” Without going into further details here, we can see that *Global* points in the direction of space, and allows, nay forces, us to take a new perspective: as if looking at our habitat from “Spaceship Earth.”⁵

Next, as with world history, global history represents an emerging experience, in which different parts of the globe and different sectors of society have had and are having different encounters with the process of globalization. Thus, global history becoming New Global History must be studied in all its modes and modulations. At the same time, of course, we look for certain general sweeping changes, such as is contained in the space/time compression of present-day life, and which may be seen to affect different peoples differently in different locales. Always, the global manifests itself in terms of the local. It is this experience that is then lifted into our effort at comprehension, analysis, and narration that we call New Global History

In the perspective outlined above, we can now argue that New Global History is a sub-field of History that can be defined as (a) the History of the globalization process, going as far back into the past as needed to understand the current factors driving globalization; and (b) the History of processes, such as the spread of plagues, or the rise of multinational corporations that are best studied on the global, rather than a local, national, or regional level. In terms of (a), which I consider the primary definition, New Global History becomes the study of a wide range of dynamic factors or processes that are encompassed by the word “globalization,” and must be understood in terms of a new and evolving analytic method and a particular body of data.

What it studies in the first instance are the factors that are at the core of globalization. They include the step into space, truly an earth shaking event; the throwing up of satellites that allow for instantaneous communication; the observation from these satellites of the environmental situation as overleaping national boundaries; the use of

⁵ For a full discussion of these matters, see my “Comparing Global History to World History,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History, XXVIII: 3 (Winter, 1998), 385-395.

these satellites to support the development of multinational corporations; the additional use of these satellites, linking computers everywhere, in the promotion and moral enforcement of human rights; and the explosion of nuclear power, both peaceful and warlike, threatening to carry with it transnational consequences.⁶

This list, in fact, is incomplete, and one of the tasks of New Global History is to add other elements in the course of research and analysis, and to refine those already given. Further, and most importantly, these factors must all be studied as operating synchronistically and synergistically, that is, as interacting vigorously with one another, with the total interaction warranting a new Historical periodization: the global epoch. Once such a periodization is accepted, the task remains of assigning dates as to when the shift first occurred: the 1950s or the 1970s.

Of course, the whole assignment cannot be carried out all at once. The process of globalization has to be looked at first in terms of its local expressions and its particular manifestations. With this in mind, the New Global History initiative has mounted five international conferences, resulting in a series of volumes. They are on Conceptualizing Global History (the old nomenclature was still in use); Global Civilization and Local Cultures; Global History and Migrations; Food in Global History; and Mapping the Multinational Corporations. (The last of these is an effort to work up an analytic and data-filled base on which then to visually represent the growing extent and power of the new “Leviathans”. A volume called Global Inc. is one result, now on the verge of publication.) Also on the drawing boards are conferences on New Global History and the City, and on New Global History and the Museum.

In short, the new initiative is being implemented initially in terms of these international gatherings and resultant publications.⁷ Soon to be set up is a web site devoted to the field and an electronic and print journal. Like its predecessor, World History, New Global History looks forward to forming an association of those interested in the subject and the approach being described here. All of this, of course, falls into the area of how one goes about institutionalizing a new field of inquiry.

With this aspect of the problem acknowledged, let us look a few others. For example, research in New Global History must create, in one sense, its own archives. Inasmuch as this new sub-field is itself undergoing constant redefining, to keep up with the sweep of globalization, its materials are emerging everyday. In this regard, New Global History is contemporary history. But given its historical perspective, New Global History also traces the origins and earlier forms of the factors it is studying, as far back in the past as is necessary. Again, this too may mean looking at traditional materials in a manner that recreates them anew.

⁶ A fuller exposition in regard to these factors is given in my “An Introduction to Global History,” in Conceptualizing Global History, ed. Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 1-24. This Introduction, in fact, is the first exposition of what has gone on to become New Global History.

⁷ In a series published by Westview Press, of which the volume cited above is the first.

In addition, the actors studied by New Global historians may not be those traditionally studied by other historians. For example, New Global History might focus on new actors of various kinds: NGOs (such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch), movements (such as the women's and environmental), and new institutions (such as the UN), as well as on the more usual ones (such as the nation-state). Even in studying the latter, however, it does so in the perspective of globalization, that is, re-examining the nation-state in terms of the role it plays in the globalization process and the effect that that process has on the existing state.

New Global History does not, like World History, claim to study everything. A New Global historian using American materials might very well skimp large parts of the Reagan or the Clinton administration, focussing solely on the elements that are related to the globalization process. Of course, the decision as to what those elements are might change in the course of research and theory. Similarly, New Global History would not study aspects of African or Asian history for their own sake, worthwhile as that project might be.

More than most sub-fields of History, New Global History is intended to be carried out in an interdisciplinary fashion. Economists are involved in the study of global economic development; anthropologists of the spread of global culture; sociologists and political scientists of the extension of civil society; and so forth, all working alongside of those in the discipline of History.

One can envisage, as an instance, a project concerned with the UN's military endeavors. An historian would seek to secure the big picture, tracing the origin of armed forces under the UN command and their subsequent engagements. An economist would study especially its funding problems, raising the question, for example, of the tax system supporting the armed forces. An anthropologist would engage in field work, observing questions of morale, emerging identity, and so on in the multinational troops employed in the UN's interventionist efforts. Team work would be energized and built into the project from its inception. In short, a new kind of historian must be encouraged in order to create and implement the new sub-field of New Global History.

Implicitly, such a new historian might be seen as a challenge to colleagues who practice more national histories. The parochialism of many History departments is apparent. For example, in one such department in the United States, in Texas, out of 21 faculty, 7 listed themselves in Texas History, an additional 10 in American History, and only 4 in non-American, i.e., European History. This situation is extreme, but it does suggest the blinkered horizons of many of Clio's followers. Academic turf wars often mirror the larger national and ideological wars that comprise the discipline of History as it has come to be constituted. In this light, New Global History may, indeed, be a threat to the existing parceling out of resources. It would be nice to think that universities everywhere would view their existing disposition of resources as complementary to New Global History, which, as a new sub-field, would necessarily draw upon national Histories and, indeed, impart to them renewed vitality and comprehension.

In all of the above, I have been advancing the view that History, i.e., historiography, is itself subject to the forces of globalization. For most of human "history", i.e., the 99% of the species' past as hunter-gatherers, History, the conscious attempt to know the past "scientifically", did not exist. Whether one chooses to start this development with the ancient civilizations of China or India, or wishes to argue for its true beginnings with the Greeks a few thousand years ago, it is a late development in human evolution. Moreover, as already noted, in the form of Western "scientific" history, starting perhaps in the seventeenth century, it has achieved prominence and power, i.e., hegemony, and imposed its eurocentric version on other peoples.

As E.H. Carr innocently expressed the initial stage of this happening, "It is only today that it has become possible for the first time even to imagine a whole world consisting of peoples who have in the fullest sense entered into history and become the concern, no longer of the colonial administrator or the anthropologist, but of the historian." Today, Chinese scholars now look at their past with the same scholarly methodology as found in the West; Indian scholars do the same. In the process, of course, they are changing the eurocentric myopia, and enlarging all humanity's historical perspective. A New Global History, therefore, is possible, though indubitably starting from certain Western preconceptions of how one conducts such a study.

In short, the history in New Global History is itself necessarily undergoing globalization. In so doing, it becomes a subject to be studied just as are other parts of the phenomena. It takes its place, along with World History, as one of the cases in which we can see history becoming History. The very Historical perspective then, that is used to study globalization, is not a static one, but subject to shifting forces and fates. Hence, the lens by which we look at the globalization process becomes itself part of that very process. How exactly this re-grinding will occur, only time--and the practice of New Global History--will tell.