
FORUM

Conference Report: “Worlds Apart? Futures of Global History”

Lena C. Christoph / Julia Schulte-Werning

“Worlds Apart? Futures of Global History”, 25–26 May 2023, Weltmuseum Wien, organized by Norman Aselmeyer (University of Bremen) and Hubertus Büschel (University of Kassel) in cooperation with the Weltmuseum Wien

Today, global history is undoubtedly a vibrant and well-established research field, with numerous journals, book series, institutes, and teaching programs. Since its outset in the 1990s, the relatively new field has been both hailed and contested. While many have seen it as a response to Eurocentric historiography and methodological nationalism, and as an analytical perspective to grasp globalization and connections; others have criticised its allegedly superficial approach and the danger of anew establishing a Western-centric concept claiming universal applicability. In parallel, political developments of intensifying nationalism around the globe, conservative backlashes against globalized realities, re-emerging Cold War fissions, unequal economic relationships between the “North” and the “South”, and the climate crisis raise new (or not so new) questions on global connectedness and apartness. Against this backdrop the conference “Worlds Apart? Futures of Global History”, organized by Norman Aselmeyer (University of Bremen) and

Hubertus Büschel (University of Kassel), set out to reevaluate the state of the field. As Aselmeyer put it, the two days were about “the good”, “the bad”, and how to proceed from this towards a fairer global history. The event took place at the Weltmuseum Wien, located in the Habsburg imperial palace of the Hofburg. Both the institution’s history as an ethnographic museum dedicated to the “non-European” and the building itself provide an entry point for reflecting on the past, present, and future of global history, as museum director Jonathan Fine pointed out. Indeed, the conference venue epitomized two of the central discussion points of the conference: the materiality and locality of historical processes, and the historical interrelations between colonialism, knowledge production, and historiography.

In his opening lecture, Jeremy Adelman (Princeton University) reflected upon the current crisis of narratives in relation to the evolution of “global history 1.0”. He argued that transitions in global interdependence also provoke transitions in the research field: global processes foster new forms of global history. The evolution of “global history 1.0” was not a “predestined” development but a much more open process. He traced the trajectory of the field, firstly, to the ways in which the material conditions of the 1980s and 1990s and the rise of the term “globalization” converged; and secondly, to the institutional evolution of bringing together area studies and international studies in terms of an accumulation of resources and expertise. However, the question of resources remains a critical issue, e.g., regarding the allocation of funds. He also addressed the danger of re-provincializing and re-nationalizing history, e.g., by framing diversity as a new form of exceptionalism. How then to be more global in global history, and move beyond the reproduction of notions of the “Westerners” and the “Resterners”? How to be more pluralistic and polyphonic? And how to think about fractures and apartness, and scrutinize the explanatory value of concepts such as divergence, distinction, and dividing? The global does not necessarily mean togetherness, he emphasized – and global history can be an important lens through which to shed light on this dynamic.

The following roundtable discussion took up several of these points, which then also marked the debates unfolding over the course of the two-days conference. The debate revolved around the pitfall of reproducing master narratives, the suspicion of methodological superficiality, and the unresolved issue of unequal distribution of resources, access, and acknowledgement. Richard Drayton (King’s College London) did not see global history in an existential crisis as the global is an important and well-established research category today, though by no means free from tensions. To be able to do fine-grained research that takes seriously the specifics of local realities, global history needs to synthesize these experiences by returning to the national, regional, and local. Only through place-based research, language skills, and specific methods can global history avoid superficiality, he elaborated. Nancy Rose Hunt (University of Florida) raised “audience”, “vernacular”, and “digital” as three key terms for reflecting on the state of the field. She emphasized the creative work that is currently being done by combining micro-history and the global, and by showing how global processes are vernacularized at the local level. Thus, she called for more funding to be used for collaborative work that diversifies the

producers of knowledge as well as the audience. For Rila Mukherjee (University of Hyderabad), global history's main contribution has been to give a platform to regions and people that had not been acknowledged before. Yet she called for a nuanced discussion of place and time in global history, since grand narratives and universalist approaches erase local experiences. The question she continues to grapple with is how to fit micro-historical events and regions into wider patterns of global change. Martina Kaller (University of Vienna) addressed the dominance of the English language in the field of global history as well as the issue of the return of master narrators and narratives, like "the long nineteenth century". She emphasized the need for transdisciplinarity, epistemologies of the Global South, as well as pluralistic perspectives and bottom-up cosmopolitanism. Carmen Nava (California State University San Marcos) highlighted the very uneven economic and political relations. She called for teaching and research approaches that deal with apartness and inequality and that embrace the plurality of knowledge construction. Akita Shigeru (Osaka University) proposed an inter-area studies approach, engaging with local, national, regional, and global levels and scales, and emphasized the importance of scholarly exchange between institutions across the world. Panel chair Lucy Riall (European University Institute) differentiated between two kinds of global history that seem to be in tension and are also represented at the conference – one that is rooted in comparative and world history relying on meta-narratives, and one that is rooted in subaltern studies, gender studies, and cultural history. For her, a turn towards area studies with a global perspective would help address some criticisms global history has faced, fostering a focus on micro-history rather than meta-narratives, and on place-based rather than distant research. The unfolding discussion shed further light on the profound inequality in terms of resources and access, illustrated by the fact that many people are excluded from mobility, access to publications and archives, and research funding. Another question was how to come to terms with concepts such as "revolution", "patriarchy", or "modernity" and whether they are needed as common denominators or should to be discarded as reproductions of Eurocentric narratives; and, lastly, whether global history as a field requires a shared set of semantics at all.

The first panel "Politics of Global History" contextualized research approaches in terms of political dynamics and was chaired by Eric Burton (University of Innsbruck). Adrián Lerner Patrón (University of Cambridge/Freie Universität Berlin) presented an emerging eclectic corpus of Latin American historiography that has challenged narratives of global processes and events from a Latin American perspective. He emphasized the importance of "sitting at the table" – but most importantly to change the shape of the table and to account for diverse ways of looking at the past. Kaveh Yazdani (University of Connecticut) problematized that many inventions that have been attributed to the West, in fact, emerged in the Global South but are omitted in conventional historical narratives. By including non-European areas into the concept of modernity, he suggested a new model of periodization – although he also warned against the reverse pitfall of Asian or African centrism. Ye Liu (New School for Social Research/Tsinghua University) highlighted the dilemmas inscribed in binaries such as "West-South" and "West-East" that solidify an

almost exclusive structure between former metropolises and colonies. In this context, coloniality becomes the foremost and universal angle to define the formerly colonized peoples and societies, which makes it increasingly impossible to situate historical phenomena without citing colonial legacies. Proposing a double emancipation from the binaries of metropole–colony and socialist–imperialist/capitalist, Liu called for more research on “South-East” relations. In the last talk, Alessandro Stanziani (EHESS) questioned global history’s focus on overcoming Eurocentrism, arguing that most approaches either replicate it in some way or depoliticize history. Instead, global historians could benefit from drawing more attention to their analytical tools, such as languages, sources, concepts, and interpretations. The unfolding discussion revolved around container terms such as Europe and the “South” as political, not geographical categories, and how to relate them to questions of periodization – two themes that would also be addressed by a number of contributions in the next panels.

In the evening, the keynote lecture by Sujit Sivasundaram (University of Cambridge) opened up ways of thinking about the global in relation to the earthy. The global can be understood through human attempts of modelling their earthy environment by means of cartography. Taking Sri Lankan sources as a starting point, he suggested to take a closer look at what lies beneath the impulse of mapping, and how accepting the instability of the ground on which history happens might provide a productive perspective. Earth is a material space rather than a modeled, globular entity. By looking at practices of mapping and how cartographers in the past incorporated divine interventions, natural disasters and environmental changes, or social events into the maps of Taprobane, Sivasundaram turned the focus on the human and material elements of cartography. He proposed an analysis of the recent Colombo protests against the backdrop of the very ground – the “Galle Face Green” lawn in the heart of the city – the protesters stood on. For him, the appreciation of the earthy and the different attempts of mapping open up a non-deterministic but materially-aware future of global history. The subsequent discussion on the history of protesting and environmental history concluded the first day of the conference.

The second day started with a panel on “Methods and Sources in Global History”, chaired by Julia Hauser (University of Kassel), introducing and juxtaposing the analytical potential of different methodological approaches. Pol Dalmau and Jorge Luengo (Pompeu Fabra University Barcelona) presented examples of *histoires mondiales* of individual European countries and scrutinized their claims for providing a non-nationalist national history. As national products – addressing national audiences –, these publications still place the nation at the center and have profound political implications, they pointed out. Chao Tayiana Maina (African Digital Heritage, Nairobi) presented her work as part of a public history project on British detention camps in the context of the Mau Mau uprising and anticolonial resistance in Kenya. Working with “forensic history”, the project aims at coming to terms with the silence around these spaces, the intergenerational trauma, and the erasure of history due to the limited access to the archival materials mostly held in Great Britain. Tracing and mapping the detention sites

with oral history testimonies, photographs, and field diaries, the project builds an open access online platform to make the camps and their history visible and accessible to Kenyans. The research project Agata Błoch (Polish Academy of Sciences) introduced, deals with the categorization and analysis of big data. By structuring and standardizing sources from different archives of the Portuguese overseas administration, the project aims to create a relational database available for future quantitative and qualitative research. Finally, Fabio Santos (Freie Universität Berlin) explored the method of critical fabulation and the measured and informed use of imagination as a means of overcoming absences in archives. Presenting examples of narratives and art works on the history and voices of enslaved people, he showed how critical fabulation may open up new ways of countering the danger of a single story told from a hegemonic perspective. In the discussion, Tayiana Maina emphasized that in digitization projects, physical presence is not enough. There need to be strategies for outreach, engagement, and communication – access is not a question of technology or materiality, but a deliberate strategy. The human curatorial decision-making process when building a digital platform is important and needs to be made transparent. Santos also stressed the importance of being reflective and transparent on gaps and imaginaries in the narrative. The panel clearly showed the potential of engaging with and blending various sources, methodologies, and approaches in global history.

The next panel on "Systems of Knowledge", with Valeska Huber (University of Vienna) as chair, brought different historiographies and conceptual reflections into dialogue. Delia González de Reufels (University of Bremen) gave insights into the current status of global history in Latin American historiography. While Latin American historians have often been skeptical towards the field and have criticized the dominance of the English language, she assessed that many new works on nineteenth- and twentieth-century history have taken on a global perspective, highlighting the innovative potential of micro history and global history in Latin American historiography. Joshua Meeks (US Naval War College Newport) reflected upon the concept of ontological security when analyzing state relations in global history. Taking the Russian attack on Ukraine as a starting point, he discussed concepts of rationality and irrationality. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (University of Bayreuth) critically engaged with the coloniality of global history and the persisting urgency to deprovincializing Africa. For him, the meta-narratives in global history approaches are a direct consequence of the colonizer's model of the world and can only be abandoned when African histories, epistemologies, and perspectives are integrated into global historiographies. The various themes and questions were deepened in the unfolding discussion, e.g., regarding questions of memory and politics, South-South contributions, and the danger of ascribing human characteristics to states.

The fourth panel on "Narratives and Languages of Global History", chaired by Karolin Wetjen (University of Göttingen), started with the contribution of Anwesha Ghosh (National Law School of India University) in which she introduced the idea of untranslatability. Taking Southernness as a mode of experience, a condition, or a way of being instead of a geographical category, she discussed translation as a colonial tactic to render

the “other” visible and legible. Cautioning against easy translatability, she introduced untranslatability as a political stance and a double refusal to be appropriated, pointing to the dilemma of “writing in italics” and to the challenge of vocabulary-building. As a way of engaging with the critiques raised by historians of the Arab world and Latin America, Nora Lafi (ZMO Berlin) proposed two alternative paths for the field: a global history that starts from the South, and that starts from a microhistory of the urban, taking local archives, societies, and languages into account. Sisay Megersa Dirirsa (Bielefeld University) critically engaged with Reinhart Koselleck’s notion of history which sought to overcome Eurocentric problems of Hegelian and Marxian historicism. But as Dirirsa argued, this concept still operates in the same Eurocentric logic of temporality as it lacks the presence of radical alterity. In order to de-center global history, one must look for different logics of temporality. By tracing the routes and transformation of Australian clay in the late 1700s, Ann McGrath (The Australian National University) connected the micro story of the clay to the history of the British Empire, the invasion of the Australian continent, and the disregard and depreciation of Indigenous knowledge and meaning. She pleaded for the incorporation of indigenous historicities and temporalities into global history. The panel and the further discussion importantly showcased the complex interrelation between notions and practices of translation and temporality.

The last panel “Topics and Concepts of Global History” fruitfully embedded larger analytical questions in concrete case studies, and was chaired by Sasson Sofer (The Hebrew University, Jerusalem). Chelsea Schields (University of California, Irvine) showed how the history of sexuality and labor complicates the history of relations between the state and companies in colonial settings. By drawing attention to the intimate, in her case study of the Caribbean fossil economy she offered a productive framework for studying imperial political economy. Cassandra Mark-Thiesen (University of Bayreuth) reflected upon relationality in global history. Perhaps global history may need to fall apart first in order to come together again in a different way – allowing for pluriversality and conviviality, and accounting for the inherent incompleteness of global history. Luise White (University of Florida) discussed African views on European weapons in a long-term perspective, providing a history of guns in Africa as an entry point to reflecting upon notions of belief and rationality and the history and iconography of violence. Joël Glasman (University of Bayreuth) debated the idea of global citizenship which is often given as implicit or explicit answer to the question of the civic purposes of global history. He argued against abstract universalism and for the importance of local histories. The subsequent discussion stressed how questions of gender, sexuality, and reproduction enrich global history research; how thinking from the vantage point of the refugee or the “stranger” might complicate perspectives on citizenships; and the difficulty of writing about weaknesses of colonial institutions and tools without downplaying their brutality. The concluding roundtable and discussion brought together the various issues. Christian G. De Vito (University of Bonn/University of Vienna) pointed to the fracture within the field of global history between macro-analytical and micro-analytical approaches, and the importance to link the understanding of colonialism with a social history of Europe

itself in order to retrieve the history of marginalized groups within just like outside of Europe. He emphasized that history is grounded and not "everywhere". Furthermore, the lack of diversity in global history and academia is also an issue of class, he pointed out. Toyin Falola (University of Austin) argued that although the question of definitions, concepts, and methodologies will remain up to debate, the very fact that global history acknowledges the past means that that future is certain. Regarding future research, he stressed the importance of addressing new realities, transnational stories, perpetual political transformations, as well as African agency. Similarly, Valeska Huber (University of Vienna) had little doubt of a future of a plural and polyphonic global history but emphasized that its current practices and concepts need to be critically examined. Scholars should take seriously the practical questions of who they give a platform, what they read, cite, and teach. The field should strive for common concepts yet be open to their constant modification or even dismissal. She also emphasized the advantage of being eclectic in methods, and advocated a more modest way of thinking and talking about the world. Dilip Menon (University of the Witwatersrand) brought to the table how a discussion around concepts of space and time could enrich global history writing. When reflecting upon space, we should consider the multiple (re-)constructions of the globe, conjunctural geographies over time, and move away from binary thinking when studying connections and transfer. Moreover, for him, the question of temporality and periodization had not been discussed enough during the conference since many categories such as "modernity" are indeed political categories and judgements, rather than temporal ones. Hermann Mückler (University of Vienna) drew attention to the importance of public visibility, impact, and communication of global history, especially in light of the refracting of contemporary politics and societies. Panel chair David Motadel (LSE) summed up the debate revolving around the challenges of the field today, the methods, critiques, spaces, concepts, and real-world contexts.

The overarching question of the conference was how to make global history a fairer endeavour. Over the course of the various contributions and discussions it became amply clear that the persistent inequalities and conceptual questions in the field need to be addressed at several levels of research practice: it is about the epistemology, the themes and methodologies, and the practicalities. One continuous point revolved around the terms and concepts employed in global history: how to leave behind Eurocentric concepts and employ new terms with which one is able to speak with each other? How to conceptualize things beyond labelling them as "alternative" and thereby continuously making room for the centre? The terms "South" and "Southernness" were reconfigured as conceptual frameworks by several participants. That no term is indispensable and that all concepts need to be continuously tested and critiqued, or even discarded at some point, was largely a consensus. Overall, global micro history was frequently raised as a productive methodological lens and potential counterbalance against sweeping grand narratives. Worlds apart? Apartness may indeed be a fruitful term to draw attention to the tensions, fractures, and multifaceted constellations of connectedness and disconnect in the global. Rather than insisting on a "we", global history can benefit from the diversifying apartness

within. The practicalities and practices of historical research were also a continuous point of discussion. Structural inequalities in terms of mobility (e.g., funding, visa, language) and access to archives and conferences were addressed in several panels and contributions, also concretely when it came to organizing this very conference. Taking the conference format as a forum for scholarly exchange, one could also think more generally about how to structure conferences in a more collaborative, inclusive, and less hierarchical way. And this also holds true for the design of both institutions and digitization projects. Importantly, these structural issues do not only apply to global history – they are a part of “general” history, too, and academia more broadly needs to come to terms with structural discrimination and inequalities. The conference, thus, was an important reminder of each one’s individual scope of action in gatekeeping or opening ways of collaborating and relinquishing the prerogative of interpretation.