

Globalizing History and Historicizing Globalization. In Memoriam of Jerry H. Bentley (1949–2012)

“The globalization of history and the historicization of globalization are two unfinished intellectual projects. Indeed they are barely under way.”¹ It is almost 10 years ago that Jerry H. Bentley problematized this double neglect and underlined the sharp contrast between this long-standing ignorance on the one hand and an equally long-lasting claim of most historical scholarship on the other hand, namely to understand the world and its development through time. Instead of developing tools by which foreign societies and peoples with their connection to the own culture could be traced and explained, professional historians have only given the nation and the nation-state a solid history, flanked by a belief that the European experience is the cornerstone of everything that has happened up until now. The many other pasts, however, have been silenced in this view. The long shadow of the marks of the time when the historical discipline and profession were founded – nationalism, industrialism and imperialism – stand at odds though with the fact that peoples at all times experience the need to know about others and create stores of knowledge about the larger world.

Jerry Bentley took the latter as starting point to plead energetically for the tracing of underlying encounters, contacts and shared trajectories. Never dogmatically, but always with enthusiasm, with all his energy he promoted world history as a subject matter and interpretative framework. In his view it had two sides, namely globalizing history, understood as learning about the world’s various lands and societies, and historicizing globalization, regarded as studying cross-cultural interactions. Owing to the fact that much had been done and gained in regard to the former, he engaged himself in what he called “larger human stories [...] the global stories of rising human population, expanding technological capacity, and increasing interactions”, arguing that they “have profoundly shaped the experiences of almost all human societies, and furthermore have worked collectively like the strands of a triple helix to reinforce one another with powerful effects throughout history”.²

Being aware that historical scholarship inevitably reflects the position of the one who produces it, he did not shy away from clearly stating that world-history writing has also been tainted by worldly interest, bearing the signs of expanding empires, missions and for that matter area studies, as well as has a bedeviled past. All too often “it has reproduced teleologies that make European modernity the reference point of the global past [...] and has] overlooked differences both within and between societies through the flat-

1 Jerry H. Bentley, *Globalizing History and Historicizing Globalization*, in: *Globalizations* 1 (2004) 1, pp. 69-81.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

tening and homogenization of peoples”, presenting Europe as the only site of dynamism and progress, while other regions being considered little more than sinks of stagnation. Still he saw no reason to follow completely postmodern and postcolonial criticism of master narratives that escape into mini-histories and the local. Instead he pleaded to delve into the realities and dynamics of the radically heterogeneous world as it came into being. Along this line one would not only find numerous cross-cultural interactions and interdependencies but would also recognize them as an essential drive in the change of societies.

Bentley pursued this ambitious research agenda, also aimed at reforming education, for about 20 years, which today is well underway to considerable extent due to his efforts. With his death, world and global historians have lost a thoughtful and engaged colleague and comrade.

Jerry H. Bentley left us a lot. Being a trained Renaissance historian he turned to world history at the University of Hawai'i where he worked from 1976 until his retirement in 2012. The first book in which he pursued his new interest, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Encounters and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Europe* (1993), became in almost no time a bestseller in the US and abroad. Following, he edited and co-authored almost a dozen volumes on the history of the global past. To mention only a few very items from his list of publications, there is his well-known textbook written together with Herbert Ziegler on *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (2000) and the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History* (2005) as well as the study of *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges* (together with Renate Bridenthal and Karen Wigen, 2007). Additionally, he published numerous articles on methodological challenges and the political strings attached to the endeavor of historicizing globalization, always refuting meta-narratives that unify and theories that universalize.³ For him all macro-histories fail due to empirical grounds because they are unable to accommodate the diversity of the world's pasts.

Being a scholar able to perceive of both the university and the historical discipline as an institution, Jerry Bentley worked to anchor world history in their structures. At his own university he developed one of the first PhD programs in world history in the US as well as was a leading figure in the founding of the World History Association (WHA) in 1982, where he promoted the aims of undertaking both teaching and research, ideally at implementing research-oriented teaching. Only a few years did he seize the chance to realize this dual mission by establishing the *Journal of World History* (JWH). The opportunity came when the administration of the University of Hawai'i decided to provide funds to launch several new journals to be published by the university press. Thoughtfully, but still determined, he negotiated with the WHA the question if the journal could

3 For example: *World History and Grand Narrative*, in: Benedikt Stuchtey/Eckhardt Fuchs (eds), *Writing World History, 1800–2000*, Oxford 2003, pp. 47-65; *Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History*, in: *Journal of World History* 16(2005)1, pp. 51-82; *The Construction of Textbooks on World History*, in: *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 16(2006)1, pp. 49-65.

become the official publication of the association and with the agreement in his hands he wrote the application for the competitive funds. Three years later the first issue was out and since then the JWH, with Bentley as the main editor, provided the newest research on the subject a place to meet and to be discussed.⁴

It did not take long until the news of the journal transcended the US-American context. In February 1992 Manfred Kossok, the founding father of *Comparativ*, wrote to one of his assistant professors a short note: “This is a really interesting journal and we should get in touch with the editor and arrange for an exchange between our two editorial teams.” The contact was established fast and out of it grew a continuous joint discussion about how to write world history and how to overcome the predominance of national history paradigms.

We, based in Leipzig and equally working on the (re-)establishment of globally thought history, learnt immensely from Jerry Bentley as well as his struggle with the JWH and the WHA for more world historical questions to be raised in the classrooms and to be addressed by archival studies. After all, in the early 1990s we were confronted with a renaissance of interest in national history writing in the context that the reunified Germany was eager to give itself a fitting past. The first time we met Jerry in person was at the International Historical Congress in Oslo in 2000, which turned out to be a decisive moment for the recognition of world history as an essential part of the agenda of professional historians. The plan there was to integrate the WHA as an affiliated commission into the work of the *Comité International des Sciences Historiques* (CISH). Jerry was the one making the pitch to the governing board of CISH that the World History Association should be recognized as an affiliate of CISH. It did not work out then; the argument for the rejection was that the WHA was too centered in the US to be an international representative of the field. Despite this setback, the effort was successful ten years later when the newly established Network of Global and World History Association was accepted as an affiliated international commission. With that one of Jerry’s dreams, the recognition of world history as valid and solid field of historical scholarship at a world scale, became true.

An enthusiastic academic and an intellectual of *engagement*, Jerry was full of humor and had the rare capability to gather people around his ideas and to make academic events festivals of sociability. We discovered through discussions in Oslo how close the notion and concept of cultural encounters he promoted was to the ‘Kulturtransfer’-approach we were developing with colleagues in France.

Later Jerry came over from Hawai’i to participate in the conference organized in honor of Manfred Kossok’s 70th birthday, which he contributed to with a powerfully eloquent plea for world history as a counter-strike against national history.⁵ A conference at the

4 Jerry Bentley, *The Journal of World History*, in: Patrick Manning (eds), *Global Practice of World History. Advances World Wide*, Princeton 2008, pp. 129-140.

5 See his contribution in: *Vom Brasilienvertrag zur Globalgeschichte. Festschrift für Manfred Kossok*, ed. by M. Middell, Leipzig 2002.

German Historical Institute in Washington DC on “World History Writing” organized by Eckhardt Fuchs provided the next opportunity to create a stable relationship between the WHA and its evolving European counterpart. The 2002-born European Network in Universal and Global History (ENIUGH) became, also thanks to Jerry’s support, an associate partner of WHA and later one of the founding members of Network of Global and World History Organisations (NOGWHISTO).

Jerry Bentley’s influence on the global community of global historians is hard to overestimate. He invested himself for decades in creating a web of people working together not only in research but also in pedagogy since he was convinced that both dimensions have to go hand in hand. In his view, a curriculum in world history would make no sense without being based on research at the highest standards possible, which he promoted by selecting the finest contributions for his journal, nor could a small community of academic experts change the attitude of a society without being firmly anchored in reforming high school, undergraduate and graduate education.

We will miss Jerry Bentley as a friend, as a member of our editorial board and as one of the most prominent scholars in the field of world history. And we will continue his plea for the two linked intellectual projects, the globalization of history and the historicization of globalization.

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