

# Reviews

## What is global history?

By Sebastian Conrad. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 299. Hardback £22.95, ISBN 978-0-691-15525-8.

Reviewed by Merry Wiesner-Hanks  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
E-mail: merrywh@uwm.edu

doi:10.1017/S1740022816000255

The question posed by this book's title is one the editors of this journal often ask themselves, and which has many answers, at least judging by the range of articles submitted to the *Journal of Global History* for possible publication. Thus this is both a review and a broader consideration of the question, taking into account other posings and answerings.

The book begins by noting this variety, which Conrad divides into three main camps: the history of everything, the history of connections, and 'history based on the concept of integration' (p. 6). Favouring the last of these camps, he argues that global history is 'both a process and a perspective, subject matter and methodology' (p. 11), and comments that these two are often in tension. After the introduction, the book is made up of three parts. Chapters 2 and 3, revisions of chapters in the author's *Globalgeschichte* (Beck, 2013), provide background and context, Chapters 4–7 give Conrad's own take on global history, and Chapters 8–10 discuss issues related to perspective.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the writing of global history from Herodotus to about the 1980s, and Chapter 3 surveys five competing approaches – comparative studies, transnational history, world-systems theory, postcolonial studies, and the notion of multiple modernities – primarily referencing works that have appeared since the 1990s, but occasionally dipping back to earlier ones. (The book has only one sentence on imperial history, and does not discuss international history as a field at all.)

Chapter 4 most explicitly presents Conrad's argument about what true global history should be: not the 'shibboleth' (p. 64) of a combination of comparisons and connections, but a history that examines 'large-scale structured integration' and pursues 'the problem of causation up to the global level' (p. 67). Here he compares global history to a slightly different group of competing approaches from those in Chapter 3 – world history, postcolonialism, and multiple modernities – pointing out the weaknesses in these on such issues as human rights and nationalism, and discussing the merits of works that take an approach that stresses integration and complex causation and thus have the 'analytical surplus' (p. 76) that global history as he defines it provides. Chapter 5 examines the issue of structured integration more closely, explaining how and why it goes beyond the history of globalization and that of interactions and connections.

Chapters 6 and 7 look at space and time, arguing that global history should be approached on a variety of scales, or with

'scale shifts', an idea taken from Jacques Revel, through which different scales overlap, interrelate, and affect one another. These reinforce the point made a decade ago by David Christian, that 'to do world history, you have to move through multiple scales in time and space', although Conrad does not cite Christian on this.<sup>1</sup> He does discuss the extended chronology of 'big history', for which Christian is a key proponent, and does not like it because it can reduce human agency. Here Conrad moves away from an advocacy of multiple scales to suggest that 'even a view that begins with the Anthropocene Epoch (the past 200 years) will be too broad to cover meaningfully what is at stake in many questions' (p. 147), which later in the chapter grows into a critique of the concept of the Anthropocene itself. In terms of space, he is more consistent in his support for multiplicity, and surveys some of the strategies that recent works have taken to rethink global space, including a focus on oceans, commodity chains, social and cultural networks, and micro-histories, especially of travellers and border-crossers. Here he also provides good examples of the ways in which theories and techniques from other fields have influenced global history.

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 discuss ways in which the perspectives of the writers and readers of global history shape the field. Chapter 8, on positionality, opens with a survey and critique of Eurocentrism in both its traditional and neo-Niall Fergusonesque varieties, expanding what has been said several times earlier in the book on this, and then discussing several other centrisms, including Afrocentrism and Sinocentrism. Here Conrad develops an analysis, drawing on Arif Dirlik, of how the attack on Eurocentrism and the

development of the polycentric notions such as 'multiple modernities' have led to a return of older paradigms of civilizations and cultural uniqueness. Chapter 9, on the politics of those who do global history, presents the critique of the field by postcolonial scholars such as Sanjay Krishnan who view global history as 'a tool for rule and domination', which Conrad rejects as a 'conspiracy-theory take' (p. 189) on the field. Conrad surveys debates about whether certain terms common in global history, such as migration, empire, religion, and early modern, flatten or erase the heterogeneity of the past and should be replaced or augmented by indigenous terminology and native categories. He sees such suggestions as 'run[ning] counter to the ecumenical and dialogic inclinations of global history itself' (p. 197), with its 'idea of a general compatibility of human experiences' (p. 198), though notes that such universalism should be reflective and self-critical. He argues that it is the processes of history (meaning the events and developments of the past), such as imperialism and capitalism, not the works of historians, which 'impose shared vocabularies' (p. 204).

In Chapter 10, on the audience for global history and the politics implied by its approach, Conrad returns to the point he made in Chapter 8 about the problems with multi-centric views of modernity, and asserts that global history should 'problematize' and 'offer a critical commentary on the globalization process' (p. 212), not simply analyse it. He surveys the institutional geography of global history, noting the (oft-remarked) hegemony of English as a language and of American institutions, though with an interesting short side analysis of why Asia 'is a privileged subject of global history writing' (p. 222). The book ends with Conrad's laying out of drawbacks in a global approach, which he characterizes as overstressing (or 'fetishizing') interactions, mobility, travel,

1 David Christian, 'Scales', in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ed., *Palgrave advances in world histories*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 82.

and flows, and neglecting settledness, power, and agency. Such drawbacks, he argues, do not mean that historians should give up the global, for 'we need it as a rallying cry ... to rescue history from container thinking' (p. 234).

The book has many strengths. It is perceptive in its presentation of the differences between connections and integration, thoughtful in laying out some problematic enthusiasms (such as those for border-crossers), and wide geographically, chronologically, and methodologically in its examples of both problematic and admirable recent work. Its analyses of the strengths of recent works, which appear in most chapters, are especially welcome, as they provide examples of how historians make sense of the past in meaningful ways and can help the field move forward. More of these and fewer critiques would have been welcome, particularly because many of the critiques are not new.

It is also unfortunate that Conrad does not directly address other recent attempts to answer the question that forms his title. He cites a few in the notes, but does not engage with them, and does not mention Patrick Manning's *Navigating world history: historians create a global past* (Palgrave, 2003) or Pamela Crossley's *What is global history?* (Polity, 2008). Not mentioning Crossley's identically titled book is especially regrettable because she would probably see his definition of global history as fitting her definition of world history (which she does not like at all): that is, a story in which there is a coherent narrative thrust about divergence and convergence. Crossley sees the strength and superiority of global history in its attempts to tell a story without a centre, though she stresses how difficult or even paradoxical this is. As Conrad several times highlights problems with multi-centric approaches, it would have been good to have seen how he positions himself with respect to her

argument. This might have led to a more nuanced presentation of polycentric approaches. Yes, they can lead to the re-emergence of old reified notions of civilizations/cultures in a new guise, but that is a pitfall of which most global historians are well aware. Many are working to tell stories of the type of interactions that Conrad favours by working upwards and outwards from the available sources in multiple languages and from multiple sites, but with a substantive core.

Crossley makes a sharp distinction between world and global history based primarily on their narrative strategies, and others have also weighed in on the differences between them. The late Jerry Bentley essentially viewed them as the same, titling his opening editorial in the first issue of the *Journal of World History*, 'A new forum for global history'.<sup>2</sup> In his chapter in Maxine Berg's *Writing the history of the global*, Jan de Vries describes world history as a teaching field and global history as a research field, a point of view that would no doubt puzzle the authors whose research has appeared in the *Journal of World History* in its quarter-century of publication, or who have written chapters surveying research on many topics in the various companions and handbooks of world history that have appeared in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> Others see world history as primarily cultural and global history as material, or global history as primarily about the recent past and world history as about the past before the whole globe became connected.

Conrad's position on this issue is not clear. He sometimes views global history and world history as the same or even elides them (global/world), and many of his conclusions

2 Jerry Bentley, 'A new forum for global history', *Journal of World History*, 1990.

3 Jan de Vries, 'Reflections on doing global history', in Maxine Berg, ed., *Writing the history of the global*, Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2013.

and assertions about the benefits and challenges of global history are the same as those made by world historians over the last several decades. He makes use of books and articles that use ‘world history’ in their titles as examples of the type of global history to be emulated, including many that have appeared in the *Journal of World History*. (Several articles that have appeared in the *Journal of Global History* are also in the footnotes, although there is no mention of the journal itself, other than a note that describes Patrick O’Brien’s editorial launching of *JGH* as ‘the traditional perspective’ (p. 244) meaning Eurocentric.) But elsewhere and often Conrad characterizes world history as an ‘older genre ... which narrowly focuses on the “rise of the West”’, a failing that global history ‘promises to transcend’ (p. 163). To prove this point, he cites David Landes’s *The wealth and poverty of nations: why some are so rich and some are so poor* (W.W. Norton, 1999) in four different chapters, along with similar works. To be fair, at times he labels this ‘a’ world history perspective and once says that the contrast is an ‘oversimplified portrayal [done] as a heuristic move’ (p. 62), but more often he calls this view ‘standard’ or simply ‘the’ world history paradigm. At one point the contrast includes people as well as product: ‘While “world history”, the global history of earlier decades, was most often an occupation of established and generally older historians, today even dissertations may pursue a global agenda’ (p. 14). This is true to a degree – though William McNeill was only forty-five when he published *The rise of the West*, an age at which many academics still consider themselves Young Turks – but many of those dissertations are produced in programmes labelled world history. Moreover, this derision goes against the elision of the two terms found elsewhere in the book, and ignores the fact that many of

the articles and essays he cites as critiquing the Eurocentric viewpoint were published in works titled ‘world history’. Heuristics – one of Conrad’s favourite words, used many times in the book to justify comparisons and generalizations – can be handy, but they can also become caricatures.

De Vries’s distinction between world history as teaching and global history as research is a fairly common one, and is true to some degree in terms of origins, which is one of the reasons why global history has greater cachet. But had Conrad looked a bit at pedagogical materials as he surveyed the global history landscape, he could have found some of the very things he calls for. A comparison of ‘state-building practices in the Roman Empire and Han China’ (p. 113), which he suggests as a possible topic, has for so long been a staple in teaching world history that those of us who do so are sick to death of it, and want something less traditional. In fact, an essay question on the 2010 Advanced Placement World History exam, given to high school students in North America and in international schools around the world, asked students to compare ‘methods of political control’ in Han China and the Roman Empire, or either of these with Mauryan/Gupta India. The answers were often dreadful, but some were not, particularly given that most of the 167,000 students taking the exam were fifteen years old. (In 2016, 287,000 students took the AP World History exam.) Similarly, *World History Matters*, an award-winning group of websites created by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and the New Media at George Mason University, presents a variety of primary sources that provide examples of structured integration on a variety of scales, and for which the historians who frame them for students consider causation up to the global level. The hierarchy of research and teaching is yet another product of the nineteenth-century professionalization of

history that produced the national narratives that world and global history seek to overcome, and this hierarchy could stand some adjustment as well. If global history is to truly 'reshape the landscapes of knowledge and revamp the institutions of knowledge production' (p. 234), it must do so for students, situated in 'institutions of knowledge production' more than they ever will be again.

As editors, our most common response to articles submitted to *JGH* that have promise is to 'make this more global'. The advice we provide for authors on how to do so varies considerably, with no one pattern or single paradigm working in all cases. Given the range of answers that global historians have to the question that forms Conrad's title, such eclecticism – what Carlo Ginzburg long ago called the 'elastic rigour' of good history – seems likely to continue.

### **The Great War and the origins of humanitarianism, 1918–1924**

By Bruno Cabanes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 390. Hardback £59.99, ISBN 978-1-107-02062-7; paperback £21.99, ISBN 978-1-107-60483-4.

Reviewed by Michael Barnett  
George Washington University, Washington, DC  
E-mail: barnett@gwu.edu

doi:10.1017/S1740022816000267

Bruno Cabanes' *The Great War and the origins of humanitarianism, 1918–1924* is an accomplished contribution to the international history of the post-First World War period in general and of the rise of modern humanitarianism in particular. The Great

War was great not only because of the magnitude of the destruction it caused but also because of how it transformed international society. Cabanes' major contribution is to delve into the intensification and internationalization of humanitarian action, triggered by the war, sustained by the continuing aftershocks, and then solidified by the West's belief that the best way to address its own war-induced inhumanity was by renewing its commitment to humanity.

The book is organized into an introduction, five substantive chapters, and a conclusion. The Introduction sets out the historical and conceptual background by outlining the destruction caused by the war and the enlarged and more nuanced sets of concepts invented to understand and respond to the mass human suffering. In the main chapters, five distinct areas of domestic and global intervention to alleviate suffering are examined, each chapter pivoting on one of the grand personalities associated with the cause. Chapter 1 tells the fascinating story of the emerging belief in France that veterans and their families (and some other war victims) were entitled to support by the state. The hero of this chapter is René Cassin, who would later gain fame because of his contribution to the post-Second World War movement to create international human rights. As the scholarly literature on the development of the modern, liberal welfare state has shown, such states could only make war by asking for sacrifices from their citizens. In return, citizens, not least veterans, expected recognition, material relief, and rights. Chapter 2 tells the story of the various ideological movements and historical forces that helped give rise to the International Labour Organization. Using the figure of the French socialist and reformer Henry Thomas, Cabanes charts the growing rise of a managerial and technocratic approach to global governance and labour.