

Generalizations in Global History: Dealing with Diversity without Losing the Big Picture

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The articles in this special issue were inspired by the work of Antony G. (A. G.) Hopkins and developed during two workshops sponsored by Western Sydney University and coordinated by Brett Bennett in 2013 and 2014. The published contributions all focus on a major methodological question in global history: How do historians create or employ generalizations—abstractions created by inducing from particular instances—in the writing of histories that are global in method or scale? There has been significant debate in history, some of it explicit but more of it implicit, about the value and limitations of generalizations. Historians rely on them to adduce particular instances into larger patterns that seek to explain causality, trace trans-temporal trends, and to make comparisons between different places.

This introductory article assesses three approaches to using generalizations in global history. We advocate an approach that allows historians to develop a global history methodology that is theoretically and empirically robust, open to engagement with other fields, and flexible in the face of new societal demands from historians. The following article by Antony Hopkins offers an historical chronology for analysing the process of globalization during the early modern, modern, and postcolonial periods that is informed by his forthcoming book on the global history of America and his earlier publications on globalization and global history.¹ Research articles by Sarah Irving, Timothy Rowse, Gregory Barton, and Brett Bennett explore how the process of globalization influenced how people in the past conceived of and created notions of human and natural diversity.

We suggest there are three main approaches to using generalizations in global history: 1) a neo-materialistic approach that allows for the development and testing of limited generalizations *within* history; 2) a deep history approach that engages with broader generalizations *within and outside* of history; and 3) a culturally informed approach with a very limited role for generalizations *within and most especially outside* of history. We argue for a pluralist approach that combines insights from all three views, but we do warn about the slippery slope of deconstruction implied by the third.

Historians who might be said to use a neo-material approach, because they incorporate an economic analysis alongside the study of social, political, and cultural factors, founded the subfield of global history in the 2000s. Many of the key debates have revolved around understanding patterns of global development. The debate over the “Great Divergence” between Europe and Asia, for instance, is characteristic of the types of issues that incorporate economic history into a wider framework of analysis. Global historians in this mould tend to test historical generalizations against case studies that are based on qualitative and quantitative data. Many, but by no means all, scholars use methods of “reciprocal comparison” and “institutional equivalence” that allow for comparisons to be made between different places, such as Europe and China.² Scholars within this group have had some engagement with the social sciences (less so with the sciences), but they tend to be wary of directly importing universal generalizations from the sciences or social sciences. For instance, historians of globalization might find inspiration in economic theory, but they rarely import models, such as neoclassical economic assumptions about rational choice theory, directly into history.

Hopkins’ article in this issue might be said to make a new contribution to this literature. He argues “globalization is a process, not a theory, though it sprouts many often conflicting theories about its causes and consequences.” There is widespread agreement that globalization created more exchange and interaction, but uncertainty about how to measure or explain it. He focuses on one central issue, that of “whether the history of globalization is the record of a process that has grown larger with the passage of time without fundamentally changing its character, or whether it is viewed more accurately as the evolution of different types in successive sequences.” Taking the latter position, Hopkins offers a schematic chronology of the different phases of globalization divided into early modern, modern, and postcolonial phases. He identifies key “agents” of globalization during each phase—such as European empires during the early modern and modern phase or supranational corporations and international governance during the postcolonial phase. Hopkins’ view epitomizes the best scholarship in this arena of global history by creating precise, measurable definitions based on case studies that can be tested by historians throughout the world.

There are a growing number of historians advocating even bigger, trans-temporal histories, such as deep history or big history, that widen the remit of global history. These historians want the history profession to engage more with interdisciplinary research and to have stronger public impact. Jo Guldi and David Armitage strongly advocate for this point in their widely discussed and debated *The History Manifesto*.³ They argue that the history profession became increasingly insular in the 1980s and 1990s because of the embrace of deconstructionist, short-term, and micro-scale studies that undermined the long-standing view that historians can and should observe long-term patterns. They advocate widening the remit of historians to allow us to engage with trans-temporal patterns and issues: “[history] has an important role to play in developing standards, techniques, and theories suited to the analysis of mutually incompatible datasets where a temporal element is crucial to making sense

of causation and correlation.”⁴ This view is a somewhat slimmer version of big history, an approach pioneered by David Christian that allows historians to use universal generalizations drawing on scientific theories, such as evolution, and temporal scales going back millions or billions of years.⁵

These two positions are distinctly at odds with postcolonial or deconstructivist approaches to global history that contest efforts by historians to trace long-term patterns, to attribute causality, or to make comparisons that are not based on direct connections. This approach denies the use of large-scale generalizations in history, and is even more dismissive of theories drawn from the social sciences and sciences. These views build on earlier thinking developed during the cultural, linguistic, and post-structural turns in the 1980s and 1990s. Lynn Hunt, one of the leaders of the cultural turn who has recently shifted to global history, warns in her 2012 book on global history that “the globalization paradigm reinstates the very suppositions that cultural theories had criticized, and thus potentially threatens to wash away the gains of the last decades of cultural history.”⁶ Leading postcolonial historians encourage a type of global contingency without cause or origin because this takes attention away from Europe as part of efforts to “provincialize Europe.” As a result, many decentred and postcolonial network approaches encourage scholars not to look for “putative origins” but rather to trace interactions between points in a network, a distinctly Foucaultian view of power relations.⁷ The prominent German global historian Sebastian Conrad calls on historians to downplay or reject “origins, either geographically or temporally” because they often point to Europe.⁸ Conrad notes that the reason for this view is that “many are cautious to avoid sweeping generalizations and master narratives that culminate in the modern West, wary of a rhetoric of the ‘global’ that they read as an imperialist discourse of domination.”⁹

It is healthy that there are so many different approaches in global history. We seek to encourage a liberality of approaches to generalizations in global history, with the caveat that we should be open to all approaches so long as an approach does not advocate a historical exclusivity that entirely denies the ability to offer other perspectives. Historians should encourage rigorous testing of all generalizations rather than warning people away from employing certain types of generalization. If we take post-structuralism and the linguistic turn seriously, then all knowledge, no matter how limited, is to some degree socially constructed. A key premise of post-structural histories of knowledge is that “facts,” no matter how small or simple, are complex generalizations involving a significant amount of tacit social knowledge. Deconstructivist approaches are useful as part of a bigger toolkit of methods that we use to question past and present meanings; but deconstruction is not itself a coherent approach to history because it ultimately denies historians the ability to reconstruct meaningful patterns. Even if patterns are merely constructs of our own minds, that still does not deny their usefulness in our lives. If, as the postmoderns say, all history is biased, and history reflects present views, then let us take that to heart and write histories that people find useful for making sense of the present.

While we should all support inclusivity and plurality, it is nonetheless worthwhile to warn about the potential dangers of deconstructivist approaches in global history (much as scholars in this tradition warn against anything that smacks of Eurocentrism). These views, if followed to their logical conclusion, would spell the end of materialist and bigger approaches to global history that allow us to make bridges outside the discipline and academy. Historians should be wary of sliding down the same slippery slope that led cultural historians in the 1980s to reject generalizations and downplay causality and materiality. Leading luminaries of post-structuralism and the cultural turn, such as Bruno Latour, have written critiques of cultural scholars who, rather than employing cultural history as one of many helpful tools to study the past, espoused their approach as orthodox creeds.¹⁰ Guldi and Armitage, among others, argue that the historical embrace of micro-history and deconstruction left the public policy arena open to scholars from other disciplines, such as political science, who spoke the language the public and elites wanted to hear.

How can global historians respond to the various pressures of engagement while staying faithful to history as a distinct discipline? One pragmatic response could define and defend a global history that is internally rigorous but has potential applicability outside of the discipline. Using consistent and transparent definitions would build up a strong empirical body of knowledge that can be tested. History has and will always have subjective elements, but it is possible to make a rigorous methodology based on cross-referencing and rigorous examination of evidence and generalizations. The outcomes of these positions may not be “objective,” but they would function as useable knowledge to be tested and applied in other situations. We must be more open to different and opposing ideas. The best way to reduce or account for bias—which always will exist—is to advocate a position of historical neutrality that judges arguments based on evidence rather than our most up-to-date views or ideologies. For instance, we should also be open to challenging currently in-vogue arguments that propose an East-West equivalence, or even an Asian superiority to Europe, with the same vigour that Eurocentric explanations have been challenged.¹¹ Evidence-based arguments with clear definitions should never be challenged by simply saying that history is too “complex” to analyse or to summarize. Scholars should propose coherent theories that can be tested throughout different times and places to determine their validity and offer new insights. This model allows historians to write histories for diverse audiences and to engage with problems inside and outside of the discipline of history so that they can remain relevant to society.

Generalizations and Deep History

We explore one new way of approaching global history and the history of globalization that takes generalizations seriously as a historical category of analysis. There has been considerable discussion about why historians generalize, and even more written on the specific generalizations made by people in the past, say during the Enlightenment. But very little has been written about the human tendency to

generalize. Are generalizations a cultural construct or something rooted deep in our biological makeup? Few scholars ever raise this question, as if it is either so obvious that it needs no response or unanswerable therefore not worth asking. There are multiple ways to approach this question. From one point of view, generalizations are complex symbols of meaning made possible by the unique brain of modern humans (*Homo sapiens*), which is the product of hominid evolution generally and our species specifically. Yet human generalizations have varied considerably across time and space, so this biological link, though important, is at best necessary but not sufficient.

It may be possible to write a deep history of generalizations that takes into account long-term and short-term patterns based on various causes and contexts. Deep history advocates, such as Daniel Lord Smail, David Christian, and David Armitage, among many others, have called for histories that utilize insights from other disciplines and tackle longer periods of time. In this method, paleoecological findings, DNA analysis of bodies, geology, and climate reconstruction from ice cores are all valuable for reconstructing a history of the past. Historians still tend to focus on written records, but are incorporating a variety of new sources, from oral history to climate records, into histories. We are living in an exciting age of experimentation in history.

A deep history approach to generalizations could go back hundreds of thousand or even millions of years. Generalizations and abstraction are possible because of the evolution of human cognitive capacities for language and abstract thought, a process that can be traced back 200,000 years to the origins of *Homo sapiens* and over a million years for earlier hominids. There are various theories for how abstract thought emerged as a result of stalking game on trails, through random gene changes, and through the use of tools. The past remains shrouded in mystery, so we will never have certainty on these theories, but we can continue to develop and test them across a range of times, places, and species.

There are some things that are firmly known because they are rooted in a material historical record. Generalization can be traced through the substantial archaeological record of culture that now dates back at least 40,000 years. The earliest human rock art of animals shows a tendency of the human mind to create an abstracted depiction of the animals that surrounded them. Abstract thought became progressively more important to people once humans underwent the Neolithic Revolution, which saw the emergence of cities and agriculture. Early philosophy speculated on the meanings and uses of abstraction. Some of the earliest philosophical ideas, most notably Plato's Socratic dialogues, focus on the "heaven of ideas," a way to describe the tendency of the human mind to fixate on abstract, generalized ideas to explain their diverse, lived experience. Other philosophies rely on complex abstractions focused on kinship groupings. Indigenous Australians devised complex kinship systems requiring considerable abstraction that has long challenged the minds of Europeans. Every society has had some form of abstraction, whether they assessed these abstractions through formal metaphysics, logic, or other explicit analysis.

Yet abstractions have changed considerably across time, so we must be wary of universalizing ideas and taking them out of context. Historians of science recognize that what people may think today about Pythagoras of Samos is not what he believed, or what people in any other time believed.¹² Still, it is remarkable how certain ideas or thinkers, such as Plato and Pythagoras, have had enduring influence because of their emphasis on generalities rather than on particulars. That the writings of certain people can become “classics” transcending time and space raises important questions about the underlying universal basis of human logic. If trans-temporal patterns exist, they require careful tracing and contextualizing.

Globalization and Generalization: Creating Ideas of Diversity

How has globalization shaped human generalizations? Are generalizations of the present different from or similar to those of previous times? We suggest that globalization has led to the proliferation of new ideas about human and natural diversity that now shapes how we view the world. The past five hundred years have been fundamentally different from any other time in history because of the compression of space and time as a result of technologies of mobility and economic and political changes that encouraged globalization. Each period of globalization since the 1500s has seen a gradual increase of global mobility despite obvious periods where mobility declined during war or recession. Globalization has encouraged people to make wider generalizations about the environment and people thanks to the increase in human contact, awareness of other parts of the world, and greater intensity of interactions, even though the overwhelming majority of the people in the world in the 1700s still lived in small agricultural settlements rather than cities or town. Yet the growing importance of long-distance trade, colonial governance, and the growing ease of mobility meant that even people who did not leave the village or town of their birth were to some degree impacted by global events.

Initial contact between cultures offers a particularly fruitful area of study for identifying how different peoples have responded to difference. A growing body of research shows how European imperial expansion initiated ideal conditions for new generalizations and abstractions forged from new experiences, peoples, and environments in previously unknown parts of the world. Three or more decades ago, most historians suggested that Europeans incorporated indigenous peoples into a pre-existing mental framework without necessarily fundamentally altering European intellectual development. Atlantic historians have spent the last decade challenging this view by showing wider epistemological implications of the meeting of Old and New Worlds. Sarah Irving notes that in the field of Atlantic studies, this view has changed drastically in the past decade: “Recently, however, some scholars have suggested a very different situation, in which the discovery of America produced a kind of shock of the new; a sense of wonder which, defying categorization, compelled the reorientation of European consciousness.”¹³ Within the Asian context, Harold Cook’s *Matters of Exchange* makes a similarly compelling argument for how Dutch

colonial expansion, and the requirements of long-distance trade and governance, led to the importance of precise information, or facts, that informed botany, medicine, and even the creation of stock markets.¹⁴

Irving's paper is part of a larger effort to connect the intellectual histories of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean worlds together. Her argument is twofold. First, the same processes that occurred in the Atlantic world, and have been studied in some detail, also occurred in the Pacific world, and should be put into a global context. She examines the spread of Scottish-influenced thinkers in the Pacific who applied the Scottish Enlightenment idea of "useful knowledge" to understand the new Pacific world they encountered in the late eighteenth century. Second, she argues that the intellectual changes that occurred based on the experience of mobility must be firmly grounded within global history and globalization because Enlightenment ideas informed efforts to develop useful knowledge to bolster the strength of the fledgling United States of America. This echoes work by A. G. Hopkins, among others, who seek to use the history of Anglo settler colonies or the British Empire to illustrate key processes in globalization.

Thinking in terms of a history of human generalizations and abstraction may help scholars to situate the legacy of rationalism, Enlightenment, and science within their proper historical contexts. There are important differences between the act of abstracting or generalizing, the formulation of an idea based on multiple experiences, and the specific argument that some generalizations are *more correct* than others based on their supposed inherent rationality or logic. The attack on the Enlightenment and the supposed influence of European global expansion is an instance where the process of abstracting and the claims of the abstraction have been conflated in a way that limits our historical understanding of the period and processes. There are many good philosophical and historical reasons to challenge the belief in universal rationality, but by attacking a caricature of Enlightenment and scientific Western thought, many cultural scholars create an inverse universalist understanding that in turn creates an essentialist idea of Europeans and their views of non-European "others." Ironically, by focusing so intensively on essentialist European ideas, scholars who sought to deconstruct the lasting influence of these ideas have perhaps given them more influence than they necessarily had at the time.

Emerging research from the past two decades shows that empire was more of a two-way process than has been portrayed by previous "hegemonic" postcolonial perspectives. This is not to in any way deny the numerous problems created by imperialism and settler colonialism. Yet historians now recognize that the oppression and frustration caused by the excesses of colonial governance led in many instances to reform. Humanitarians and critics of empire brought many colonial abuses to light. Criticism of empire by Europeans and non-Europeans informed ideas of British liberty and ushered in the conceptions of universal human rights, a key idea underpinning modern democratic societies throughout the world. Enlightenment political and social ideas played an important role in spreading the idea of democratic governance globally. The example of the American Revolution and French

Revolution provided the basis for revolutionary thought and constitution-making globally for non-Europeans in the late eighteenth century until the present. The history of human rights developed as a result of the material-intellectual engagements caused by the challenges of diversity during various phases of globalization.

Recent studies of colonial governance reaffirm the view that empire and globalization should be conceived less as a totalizing, homogenizing process and more as concomitant changes that were shaped by prevailing global conditions: flows and networks linked together different parts of the world that were always mediated by local conditions. This perspective is a welcome corrective to the somewhat one-sided view advanced in earlier work, such as James Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, a book that argues that attempts to improve the world through the application of the "science" of governance have failed. Scott, along with Theodore Porter's *Trust in Numbers*, rightly points to the dangers of quantification and calculation in government decision-making. Yet one feels sometimes that these views throw the baby out with the bathwater by denying the "improvements" of the world that economists and others recognize have led to a global increase in living standards, and a seemingly steady decline in societal violence and mortality.¹⁵ Even criticisms of forestry by Scott and others should be put into context. The vast planted conifer forests of Europe he mentions are still in existence over 200 years later—hardly a total failure.¹⁶ Historians have long sought to redress the wrongs of the past, a noble task no doubt, but one that often makes history more critical than constructive. This is one reason why historians find it hard to reach scholars outside of the humanities and softer social sciences whose disciplines present more neutral to positive views on political freedom, economic growth, and human health.

Tim Rowse's article in this issue explores how the emergence of statistical tabulations of indigenous populations reflected a shift towards humanitarianism in the settler colonies in British Australia, New Zealand, and North America. British colonial officials initially thought of indigenous groups as "peoples," something that reflected the self-understanding and even sovereignty of groups; but in the 1760s they started to conceive of them as "populations" to be governed by imperialists. He explores statistical tabulations that highlight this transition through four case studies: Sir William Johnson's tabulation of North American Indians in 1763, Major H. G. Darling's analysis of Canadian Indians in 1828, Walter Mantell's 1848 description of Maori landowners in New Zealand, and Edward Stone Parker's 1850 tabulation of Aboriginal people in New South Wales, Australia. Rowse shows how statistical thinking about people used concepts "to equate phenomena, that is, to construct classes of things. These categories become 'social facts' that actors must take into account in their behaviour . . . [that] 'hold together' through cognitive effort (data collection and analysis) that informs social administration." Rowse's article builds on Talal Asad's thesis that statistics helped inform the modernization of peoples by making incommensurable cultures into commensurable ones, if only abstractly. In the context of colonial Australia and the United States, that statistical

knowledge rendered quantifiable difference of humans into populations that were knowable and therefore seemingly more manageable.

The developmental ideology of the colonial state emerged from a similar background of abstraction, quantification, and manipulation of nature and society by the state. Enlightenment ideas of improvement gained steady traction from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, when European and European colonial governments first started employing professionals with scientific and technical expertise to direct “improvement” efforts. The power of experts grew until the mid-twentieth century, a period Joseph Hodge calls the “triumph of the expert” within colonial development.¹⁷ The decisions of experts gained greater significance as governments gained more power and control over nature and society. Development’s worst follies, such as the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme, reflected the height of the power of experts. At the same time, many of the greatest achievements—the Green Revolution, to name one—came directly out of the same ethos of development that continued after decolonization through the United Nation’s Food and Agricultural Organization, UNESCO, and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

A growing body of historical and geographic research points to how scientific work took on distinct local traditions based on the people and environments where scientists worked. Indigenous knowledge and practices became imbedded within place-based knowledge that circulated elsewhere. Determining indigenous influences is part of the larger social mission of revising contemporary conceptions of politics, law, the economy, and the environment to account for non-Western ideas and to empower marginalized peoples. The category of “the indigenous” has risen to prominence on the back of debates about civil rights, political values, and citizenship in parts of the world that were colonized during the past five hundred years. Elsewhere, Rowse has shown how the idea of a common “global indigenism” emerged in the early 1990s to represent indigenous peoples.¹⁸ Yet the desire to uncover indigenous knowledge should not lead historians to either reify or to claim indigenous knowledge where there is little evidence to support the assertion.

In his article, Gregory Barton argues against what he calls the “myth of the peasant” that has been used to explain the origins of organic farming methods in the twentieth century. The view that organic farming is steeped in peasant wisdom is in many respects a product of marketing and the romanticization of the “ancient” practices of the East, itself a type of orientalism. Barton shows how this idea emerged among orientalist writers who extolled Chinese and certain Indian methods of recycling humus and human waste. He focuses on the scientific experiments and private letters of Albert and Gabrielle Howard, two of the most influential thinkers and popularisers of organic farming. Albert and Louise read widely and knew about the Chinese and Hunza precedents, but their experimental methodology and scientific claims were firmly grounded in empirical investigations and the creation of a new framework to explain the importance of organic matter in agricultural fertilizing.

Less research has gone into exploring how understandings of indigenous ecosystems and species evolved at the same time as the concept of indigenous peoples emerged. In many respects, the lack of research on the indigenous turn in environmentalism reflects the longstanding tendency of scientists and many environmentalists to see conceptions of nature as being somehow “natural,” when in fact they are deeply cultural. Thinking about nature as having “indigenous” characteristics and rights led to a fundamental shift in environmental management. During much of the age of European imperialism, settlers and officials encouraged a model of “ecological liberalism,” that is, mixing of species from around the world to create cosmopolitan, utilitarian, and pleasing natures. The shift towards seeing nature as “indigenous” in the 1960s and 1970s led to the rise of modern thinking about biodiversity preservation, invasive species management, and restoration ecology that guides contemporary conservation efforts.

Brett Bennett’s final article in this volume examines why Australians and South Africans of British ancestry started to celebrate and conserve the indigenous vegetation in both countries in the 1960s and 1970s. This is part of the longer story of how European settlers over time gave greater weight and value to local knowledge, experience, and situations than to values derived in Europe. Bennett argues that the decolonization, or de-domionization, of Australia and South Africa in the 1960s led to a significant loss of identity and sense of place, which previously was connected to empire and ethnicity. South Africa’s decision to leave the Commonwealth in 1961 and Britain’s abandonment of Australia struck a blow to the identity of English speakers in both countries. The rise of environmentalism and new nationalism encouraged people to identify and celebrate unique indigenous species of plants found only in their respective countries. Australia and South Africa were global pioneers in the development of indigenous and native gardens in the 1960s. People in both countries created more public native and indigenous gardens the 1960s than probably any other country in the world. There is an enduring legacy that can be traced in the gardening practices and conservation zeal of English speakers of a British background in both countries.

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Notes

- 1 Hopkins, *Globalization in World History*; idem, *Global History*.
- 2 See De Vries, “Reflections on Doing Global History,” 32–47.
- 3 Guildi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*.
- 4 Ibid., 104.
- 5 Christian, *Maps of Time*.
- 6 Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era*, 59.
- 7 See Lester, “Imperial Circuits and Networks.”
- 8 Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History,” 1027.
- 9 Conrad, *What is Global History?* 53.
- 10 Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”
- 11 See Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence*; idem, *Escaping Poverty: The Origins of Modern Growth* for a countervailing view.
- 12 See Martinez, *The Cult of Pythagoras*. Martinez argues for humans to make our own myths, or to make myths suit us.
- 13 Irving, “An Empire Restored,” 27.
- 14 Cook, *Matters of Exchange*.
- 15 See Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.
- 16 Bennett, *Plantations and Protected Areas*, 29.
- 17 Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*.
- 18 Rowse, “Global indigenism.”