

EDITORIAL

Editors' note – Global history after the Great Divergence

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This is the first issue of the Journal produced entirely by the new team of editors, completing a handover which began back in 2019. We are deeply grateful to William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Merry Wiesner-Hanks and Barbara Watson Andaya, as well as to previous editors and the founders of the Journal, for their indefatigable support and stewardship during the transition. We also thank the previous managing editor, Pauline Khng, and our current managing editor, Dannielle Shaw, as well as the copy editors and staff at Cambridge University Press, without whom this Journal would not see the light of day. In this introduction, we take the opportunity to reflect briefly upon global history as a field, and how the *Journal of Global History* may contribute to its evolution in the coming years.

In its current manifestation, global history dates from the 1990s. However, in spirit and ambition, it has a much older pedigree. Many communities and polities of the past cultivated a version of what might be called global history. Though going under different names, this history was marshalled by contemporaries to help them understand their own present, and fashion credible prospects for the future. They studied aspects of their known world, perceived as fundamental, on a range of scales over long periods of time. The imperatives of the global history practised were thus simultaneously analytical and moral, and this remains true of the version which prevails today.

Yet, the specific questions and debates, and the specific ideals and values, which animate today's version of global history, are unique to it. They are shaped in particular by the field's experience of relative marginalisation in the late twentieth century, when the profession, working mainly within the parameters of civilisational, imperial, national or local history, was struggling to come to terms with the radical critiques associated with poststructuralism and postcolonialism. In this situation of growing fragmentation and, indeed, confusion, steps were taken in the 1990s which, in retrospect, facilitated the re-emergence of global history. This re-emergence owed a great deal to the deepening impact of globalisation, a subject then gaining prominence in the social sciences. At the vanguard of the new global history was scholarship on the political economy of the early modern world in grand comparative mode, especially between China and Europe, as part of the Great Divergence debate. This debate was a major inspiration for the foundation of the Journal in 2006.

Over the past two decades, scholarship on the succession of globalisations from the fifteenth century onwards has rapidly expanded, while new scholarly fronts have materialised to reinforce the return of global history. Among the most active have been the history of the Anthropocene, Big History, conceptual history and premodern historiographical traditions. Alongside these new fronts, major subjects of longstanding interest have been revitalised through the prism of global history. These include, for instance, histories of modernity and capitalism, sovereign governance and the state, oceanic worlds, human rights, international organisations, slavery and the slave

trade, European imperialism, microhistory, the First Industrial Revolution, diasporas and migration, commodity frontiers, public health and the movement of flora, fauna and pathogens.

A cursory glance at the sheer variety of subjects above might suggest that global history presides over polyphony at best, chaos at worst. What do they have in common? Clearly, any shared basis is not vested in the subjects' physical scale, which (with the possible exception of research on past globalisations) were often not literally 'global'. Rather, the varied contributions of today's global history all share a *transgressive impulse*; they tackle important developments in the past that transcend the boundaries of what currently pass for the established fields and disciplines. It follows that the principal value of global historical research does not lie in the historical details *per se*. It lies instead in its prior concern for elaborating novel approaches to grasp developments of world historical significance. In other words, what distinguishes global history is its concern for crafting new concepts and methods to crystallise aspects of the past which would otherwise remain obscure or elusive.

A second matter regarding the field's coherence is the temporal scope of the themes covered. From about the mid-nineteenth century onward, processes of global integration underpinned by technological innovations in transportation and communication have accelerated. Notwithstanding previous accelerations, the growing volume and intensity of transnational exchanges from the mid-nineteenth century, as well as the regulatory institutions that emerged in their wake, have arguably produced an ontological rupture. Consequently, approaches to global history in the modern era, as well as the variety of its subjects, tend to differ from the global history conducted on earlier periods. This seems to create more barriers than desirable to the construction of global histories taking a *longue durée* perspective up to the present.

Thirdly, there is the pertinent question of *who* writes global history. This is not a comfortable question. To put it bluntly, the field is dominated by historians who have been born, raised and educated somewhere in the Northern Atlantic basin, and the vast majority of submissions, including the themes they foreground, are generated at institutions located in the Western world. This is not an ideal situation for a truly 'global' practice of global history. One journal can do only so much to correct structural and systemic imbalances and inequalities. But we as editors are committed to addressing these issues as best as we can. One step the Journal has already taken is to diversify the editorial board in order to make it more inclusive and we will remain attentive to the composition of our submissions, our peer reviewers and our publications.

Given the concerns above, a primary motivation in global history is to avoid *unwarranted* ethnocentrisms, anachronisms, essentialisations and path dependencies. That motivation throws into sharp relief the centrality of determining more robust ways to differentiate between constants and contingencies, and, among the latter, between contingencies that were endogenous to a particular context and those that were exogenous. Awareness of this very matter underlay the original mantra of 'comparisons and connections' championed by the early proponents of global history. The mantra has been elaborated perhaps most fruitfully in the context of large-scale reciprocal comparisons between historically and culturally distinct areas in the early modern period. Further debate has put the spotlight on the commensurabilities and incommensurabilities in encounters between economic and socio-political concepts emanating from different worldviews; the mediation between structure and agency on multiple scales via prosopography; and more integrated analyses of different kinds of sources, especially textual but also archaeological and climatological, which have traditionally been kept apart in their own disciplines.

Global history is thus necessarily an open-ended pursuit. Its potential derives partly from its relationship to other fields in the profession. At the same time, its potential is *also* rooted in global history's own distinctive identity. In our view, the best way to strengthen the autonomous identity of global history as a field is to tame the centrifugal forces inherent to its subject matter by focusing on contributions that address subjects of substantial historiographical weight. Too often we receive submissions whose arguments are decoupled from any wider scholarly conversation, and primarily justified on the basis of phenomenon X, process Y or entanglement Z not having

been explored before. But this does not suffice to demonstrate a submission's novelty or importance. Keeping global history vibrant requires a balancing act between exploring new material and participating in older, shared conversations. In order to stimulate big debates and, indeed, start fresh conversations, the Journal has introduced a commissioned section entitled 'Arenas in Global History'. The first edition of this will appear in the next issue (16:2) and replaces the book reviews section. We have also launched a social media channel to accompany the Journal and provide another forum for debate. You can follow us on Twitter (@GlobalHistJnl).

The raison d'être of global history is to encourage and facilitate research to advance our understanding of matters of world historical significance. Under the new team of editors, the *Journal of Global History* will continue to be a forceful advocate and welcoming forum for such research.