

Sebastian Conrad. *What is Global History?*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 312 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-15525-8.

Reviewed by Orel Beilinson

Published on H-Teach (September, 2017)

Commissioned by Camarin M. Porter (Western Colorado University)

As young historians promptly discover on their own, the term “world history,” as is its counterpart, “global history,” is the most current trend in the study of history. In academia, the US and European history sequences were joined by a two-course sequence that aims to survey the history of human society since its dawn to today. Moreover, scholars are explicitly and implicitly asked to refer to the global dimensions of their work, sometimes as a means of legitimizing their research. In this overall concise volume, Sebastian Conrad of the Freie Universität in Berlin provides a succinct overview of a field with rich theory and branches galore.

Following an introduction to the book that defines the scope of the field (or why global historians often stick to demarcated spaces) and its place in historical research, chapter 2 offers a historiographical survey of writing *global* history. Having established that this approach in writing history is about considering global processes, the author finds that historians as early as Herodotus and as distinct as Sima Qian and Ibn Khaldun wrote *globally*. Conrad traces the transformations in the writing of history from “ecumenical history” to the meteoric rise of global history in the 1990s and 2000s, following the post-WWII period of nation building.

While he concedes that writing world history has existed “in a sense... [since] historiography itself” (p. 18), global history is a “distinct approach” (p. 62) to him. In chapter 3, “Competing Approaches,” Conrad discusses the various perspectives that contain elements of nonlocal history. Comparative history is an essential part of any analysis, but as a method of study it often “flatten[s] the heterogeneity within each case” (p. 40) and tends to ignore connections between the two cases under study, assuming autonomy out of fear of contamination. While “transfer”/entangled histories sought to complement these limitations, they retained the “bilateral logic” that proved “insufficient” in the study of truly “global” events such as the 1929 economic crisis (p. 42). Transnational history “explore[s] the ways in which a country was situated in the world” (p. 45) and the impact of external phenomena on the given country; its key characteristic is the crossing of state borders. It has often served to empower the national narrative by infusing the complexities inherent in the historical process into it, but has usually stayed within the limits of using the global as a foil. Breaking free of the nation, studies based on the world-systems theory seek to define regions bigger than that, but often “in ... more dogmatic and less empirical” forms (p. 50). Both postcolonial studies and multiple modernities are historio-

graphical approaches that derive from dissatisfaction with modernity theory. The former is particularly useful for its insights on the dynamic of transnational processes and exchanges, the cultural construction of national identities, and the focus on the inequality that lies in the heart of global integration (usually favoring cultural explanations at the expense of political or economic ones, and while employing a very broad definition of colonialism, a core term in their body of theory). The latter approach presupposes the existence of multiple models of modernity that are not necessarily built on the paradigm of Westernization and secularization, but such a methodology usually forgoes the focus on connectivity which lies in the heart of global history.

So, what makes global history a distinct approach? Unlike traditional world history, global historians “are not concerned with macro-perspectives alone,” and may “seek to situate concrete historical issues and phenomena within broader ... global context” (p. 65). Moreover, they question the usual analytical units (e.g., nation-states and civilizations) and employ what Conrad calls “alternative notions of space” (p. 65). A third feature is global history’s emphasis on connections, integration and “relationality.” Connections themselves are not enough; it is the analysis of their strength, character, and impact that distinguishes the global historian. Having established this working definition, chapter 5 focuses on integration, touching on three main issues: the difference between global history and the history of globalization, the driving forces behind integration, and the chronological span of global history, given its emphasis on integration. Chapter 6, one of the strongest in this volume, deals with the concept of space and the spatial turn in global history. Its treatment of nonstandard geographic units and of networks theory is refreshing and useful for the consumer of national histories. Any discussion of space must be followed by a discussion of time. Chapter 7 therefore addresses the adjustment of our lens to capture longer or shorter peri-

ods and analyzes the influence they exert over the historical mechanisms we find responsible for the phenomena or developments under consideration.

While the previous chapters discussed research subjects, chapter 8 returns to the researcher. Conrad rightfully notes that global history is based on “axiomatic assumptions” grounded in “value judgements and a hierarchy of meaning,” and as such it would be deceiving to describe the process as a simple shift in scale, lens, or focus (p. 186). The chapter then moves to describe Eurocentrism; positionality; the rise, fall, and return of the civilizations model; and the centrism(s) debate. Chapter 10 is even more philosophical in its approach and therefore fully comprehending its ideas is an exacting task. It links “worldmaking” with the craft of the (global) historian, carefully eschewing more radical tendencies that sees the entire work as “an abstraction, an invention, or a construction” (p. 186). The final chapter of the volume addresses “the politics of global history” (p. 205). It shifts the focus from the researcher to the consumer of works of global history. Such a discussion includes, for example, the link between writing about globalization and globalization as an ideological subject of heated political debates. This fascinating discussion is further complicated by engaging the unequal relationship between Western and foreign historiographical traditions, as well as the hegemony of English-language scholarship, disseminated by American and European institutions and media, over locally produced knowledge.

The book is well written and generally well edited. Minor typos can be found (for example, *Tarih-i Hin-i garbi* instead of *Hind-i*), but nothing subtracts from the wonderfully crafted arguments. The author’s erudition and mastery of varied scholarship is reflected not least by forty-three pages of densely squeezed notes but also by myriad examples taken from various periods, regions, and areas of historical inquiry. These examples

are an inseparable part of the theoretical discussion and contribute to the reader's understanding. All in all, this volume is an unprecedented achievement (while Diego Olstein's 2015 *Thinking History Globally* is a commendable alternative) for students and scholars alike, yet might be too heavy for the "sympathetic public."

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-teach>

Citation: Orel Beilinson. Review of Conrad, Sebastian. *What is Global History?*. H-Teach, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49868>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.