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Short Title: A Survey of World History Studies

Abstract:

This essay offers a first-year history graduate student's perspective on the semantic haziness that surrounds world, global, and transnational histories. By examining the theory and methodology of these various approaches this essay offers a critique and discussion of the theoretical and methodological problems that can and do arise in world, global, or transnational research.

Keywords: world history, global history, transnational history, theory, methodology, networks, periodization

A Survey of World History Studies: Theory, Methodology and Networks

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Today the terms world, global, and transnational appear ubiquitously across historical and social science literature. In a brief survey, one can find a course in *world* history covering “everything” from 1500 to the present, a *global* history of migration, a *transnational* history of 1968 protests or a *globalized* look at NGOs. While these studies all evoke a similar notion of “the world,” their usages produce disparate studies, findings and theories depending on how they are employed. But what exactly differentiates these histories? How are these terms used by historians? How can one “do” world, global or transnational history? More importantly, what are the implications of employing a particular terminology? As the academic debate surrounding these concepts is lively and contentious, this brief essay offers no obvious answers or definitive clarifications. However, by outlining some of the major themes and research revolving around these terms, highlighting critiques and common ground, this essay hopes to elucidate how scholars, today and in the past, have approached world, global and transnational studies and offers a few conceptual and methodological considerations for the contemporary world, global, and transnational historian.¹

¹ Notably, this essay focuses only upon the theories and methodologies of the western historiographic tradition of world, global and transnational historical studies. In doing so, this essay leaves aside an important discussion of the traditions of non-western “world” histories and conceptualizations. Additionally, this overview does not seek to bring any comprehensive agreement on the meanings of the terms “world,” “global,” or “transnational” that are employed haphazardly in virtually all historical studies. Indeed, the varied usage of these terms to characterize any number of events, actions, regions, movements or concepts compound the uncertainty surrounding what world, global, and transnational histories exactly are.

The core difficulty in defining world, global or transnational history arises from a semantic dilemma. How does one brand a broad, far-reaching historical study without engaging the terms “global,” “transnational” or “world?” The frequent interchangeability of these labels connotes an idea of uniformity among them. All of these terms are utilized to describe historical processes that existed beyond local or national boundaries. Yet, as I will outline, studies engaging these terms are far from analogous and can be quite dissimilar in frame, theory, and methodology. Amidst the semantic confusion the three major approaches in historical scholarship that breach the nation-state paradigm and tackle world history directly can be largely differentiated in terms of scope, theory and intent.² Each different historical approach essentially works to map out a network of actors and connections, or a series of networks of actors and connections, in order to account for the large-scale processes of human interactions over time. The differing units of analysis used in world, global and transnational studies directly affect the geographic scales they can cover.

World history, with its origins commonly cited in William McNeill’s 1963 *Rise of the West*,³ searches for the connections among geographically distinct peoples over time. Noted world historian Patrick Manning, in his article “The Problem of Interactions in World History,” elaborates, “world history emphasizes the interaction of the pieces (be they community, societal, or conventional) in human history and . . . seeks to assess the experience of the whole of humanity through the study of these interactions.”⁴ Conceptually, by focusing solely upon the macro-scale, world historians map a picture of a global “network” that is composed of only a few

²My categorizations should by no means be considered comprehensive or strictly bounded as these wide-scaled studies share similar theories, periodizations, and units of analysis. Scholarly debates about the constitution of each approach are ongoing today. See Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in A Global Age,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (Oct 1995), 1034-1060; C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (Dec 2006), 1441-1464; Bruce Mazlish, “Comparing Global History to World History,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (Winter 1998), 385-395.

³William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁴Patrick Manning, “The Problem of Interactions in World History.” *American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (June 1996), 771-82.

major actors, or nodes, that are connected by the movement of people, objects, ideas and technologies between them. As the scope of these studies is expansive, their units of analysis must be accordingly large. These units--large populations--have been traditionally classified and demarcated as the 'major civilizations' in human history.⁵ More recent scholarship avoids comparative civilization studies, but maintains broad units of analysis such as the 'region,' 'nation' or 'empire.'⁶ Notably, using these units of analysis requires sweeping generalizations about the homogeneity of people living within broad geographic spaces and necessarily ignores the diversity of individual, local and community motivations that shape historical events. Nonetheless, world history works to understand the exchanges in human history by investigating how regionally and culturally defined blocs have been connected over time.⁷

Global history, as a distinct field, has grown considerably in the last two decades. While similarly looking for large-scale human connections in history, this approach seeks to historicize the conditions of contemporary globalization—the increasing integration of connections between people and places across the globe. Many global historians argue that the world has entered a new 'global epoch' characterized by the compression of both time and space.⁸ These historians, then, search for the histories that explain both the conceptual and physical connections among all

⁵ Early works in world history such as Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*, HG Well's *The Outline of History*, Ferdinand Braudel's *A History of Civilizations*, William McNeill's *Rise of the West* and Marshall G.S. Hodgson's *Rethinking World History* all use "civilizations" as their major units of analysis.

⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein's World-systems theory could also be understood within this world-history framework. Wallerstein's *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* focuses primarily on the functioning of the global economic system and partitions the world into three zones of economic interaction: the core, semi-periphery and periphery. Additionally see Patrick Manning (ed.) *World History: Global and Local Interactions* for examples of smaller scaled world histories.

⁷ Another different, yet similar, wider-framed approach to world history—the field of "Big History"—organizes the world into large units of analysis. However, these histories seek to incorporate both planetary and human history into one continuous narrative history—from the Big Bang to the present. While ostensibly similar to world history's search for large-scale global connections, Big History appears more engaged in a different project: a search for the increasingly complex astrological, geological, environmental, biological and human complexities and interconnections that have composed all of time. Because world, global and transnational histories mostly focus upon the historical connections between people and societies over broad geographical spaces, categorizing Big History as a fourth world-history "approach" would seem to be a false comparison. See David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (University of California Press: 2005). or JR McNeill and William McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of History* (W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2003).

⁸ Bruce Mazlish explores this topic in depth in *The New Global History* (Routledge, 2006).

people across the world.⁹ Neva Goodwin, in her chapter from *Conceptualizing Global History*, explains “the global historian presents stories with which all humans are invited to identify, rather than stories aimed to arouse the group consciousness of some.”¹⁰ In its quest to find and trace interactions across all spaces, global history has no consistent unit of analysis. Global historians depict the world as covered in networks of connections of varying scales and amorphous shapes. The focus of these studies heavily emphasizes the links between the nodes of a given network and follows events, ideas, organizations or objects across space. For example, a global history will trace how a disease, a musical trend, or a multinational corporation moves between and across continents, oceans or regions.¹¹ Other global histories may investigate the fickleness of power centers throughout the world, highlighting the shifting shape of global network nodes.¹² Within this framework “the conundrum that global history has set itself,” emphasizes Pamela Crossely, in *What is Global History?* “is how to tell a story without a center.”¹³ By fixating upon the histories that move between places and people and emphasizing the fluid shapes and locations of actor-nodes, global history works to piece together the strands of the webs of connections that have led to our contemporary, globalized context.

Finally, *Transnational* history also looks for cross-cultural and cross-regional movements of people and ideas. However, transnational history’s conceptual frame locates its actor-nodes within national boundaries. Matthias Middell and Katia Naumann in “Global History and the Spatial Turn” find that “transnational history bridges the national, the sub-national (local, regional), and the global by exploring actors, movements, and forces that cross boundaries and

⁹ AG Hopkins finds that many periods of “globalizations” can be found throughout world history in *Globalization in World History* (W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2002).

¹⁰ Neva Goodwin, “The Rounding of the Earth: Ecology and Global History,” ed. Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, *Conceptualizing Global History* (Westview Press, 1993).

¹¹ See Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, eds., *Conceptualizing Global History* (Westview Press, 1993).

¹² Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, “Global History and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization,” *Journal of Global History* 5, (2010), 149-170.

¹³ Pamela Kyle Crossley, *What is Global History?* (Polity Press, 2008), 4.

penetrate the fabric of nations.”¹⁴ In this sense, a transnational history is geographically confined to the countries that harbor its particular units of analyses. Unlike world history’s giant actor-nodes, transnational network actors are defined as groups, individuals, concepts or events that move or are connected across political spaces.¹⁵ Much of this work has been aided by the efforts of anthropologists and sociologists such as Arjun Appadurai and Anthony Giddens whose respective works on social imaginative spaces have encouraged transnational historians to identify how people, movements or ideas transform as they move or exist across multiple locations.¹⁶ By connecting or following actors, events or ideas across national territories, transnational history offers insight into the large-scale global historical processes that are affected and changed by the act of moving across political borders. In brief, a transnational history explores both the nature and implications of the movements and interactions that compose the links between a network of actors who are geographically located within nation-states.

This brief list of world, global, and transnational approaches to history reveals three distinct attempts at conceptualizing the history of human connections. Despite their seemingly synonymous labels, the varying scales and ambitions of these world-encompassing histories become evident in an overview of their goals. Each approach incorporates a different vantage of the historical processes that move across geographic space: *world* history looks at continental and global historical networks composed of a few, regionally defined actor-nodes; *global* history sees the entire globe as a web of networks and connections and focuses specifically upon the

¹⁴ Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, “Global History and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization,” *Journal of Global History* 5, (2010), 160.

¹⁵ Notably, a comparative historical study of nation-states would more likely be considered World History as the comparable units of analysis require large-scale abstractions about the actions of entire populations.

¹⁶ See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)

histories that move across geographic, social and political spaces; and *transnational* history locates its actors and connections in between the boundaries of nations. The research and integration of evidence involved in mapping these historical connections across vast spaces is no small task. These studies must not only locate and synthesize evidence of connections across distant geographic spaces, but also weave them together with a variety of local histories. This work demands an interdisciplinary investigation of an array of evidence beyond traditional archival research. However, on top of these sizable research challenges lies the second major conceptual issue for these geographically broad historical studies to consider: the demonstration of change over time. How these histories characterize time carries certain methodological risks.

Each approach highlighted above has developed a two-dimensional map of historical network connections. The relationships between historical actors are plotted across geographic space. How, then, do these studies characterize historical processes over time? How do they incorporate a third-dimension—historical change—into their two-dimensional network of relationships? That is, how do these approaches explain how global connections transform over centuries of history? For the most part this has been accomplished by the marking of identifiable historical periods, each containing a network of connections, which are then plotted over time. World histories commonly locate definitive epochs of cultural and material exchanges between civilizations or regions. Global histories search for eras of extensive connectivity and then tie successive time periods together with an overarching theme of interconnectivity or increasing globalization.¹⁷ Thus, we may find a world or global history divided into chapters showcasing successive periods of global connections, periods that are plausibly linked through theories or

¹⁷ Transnational history, by nature, seems avoids this project of describing the long *durée* of historical connections altogether, examining only the historical processes that have been caused and complicated by the rise of nation-states.

narratives of modernization, human progress or increasing interconnections between people and places.

The ramifications of these periodizing histories, however, are significant. Most considerably, in the process of chronologically plotting networks of connections, these wide-scaled histories offer pictures that are notionally flat.¹⁸ That is, they provide insight into the connections in human history but do not account for the dynamics of those interactions over time. Time becomes compartmentalized into autonomous periods of unique relationships between historical actors. Not only do these periodization schemes risk essentializing the distinctiveness of historical periods, they discount the possibility of historical processes existing across them.

For example, one could find a world or global history that separates the first millennium into, say, three time periods of human connections. The division of those three periods, then, emphasizes the differences in the historical processes within each time period and denies the possibility of other linkages or connections existing across the artificial time boundaries of each demarcated period. We are then left with three distinct periods, or snapshots, of first millennial history that are ostensibly connected by their successive chronological order. Still missing, though, is an analysis or explanation of how and why certain historical processes ended or changed from one period to the next or an elucidation of the social, ideological and material connections and linkages that persisted over time. Globalization scholar William Robinson offers a useful warning against this potential methodological pitfall in “Beyond Nation-State Paradigms.” He writes, “social science should be less concerned with static snapshots of the momentary than with the dialect of historic *movement*, with capturing the central *dynamics* and

¹⁸ Frederick Cooper discusses the problematic of ‘flatness’ in historical scholarship in his chapter “Globalization” in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 91-112.

tendencies in historic processes.”¹⁹ Thus, the networks described in world and global histories do well in piecing together the connections among people in history, but have yet to fully explore the nature of how and why global connections exist or develop a theory that accounts for how these connections transform, endure or are lost over time.

World and global historians, of course, do account for historical changes over the long *durée*. However, by offering narrative themes of “progress,” “modernization” or “globalization” that causally link periods of human connections, some of these histories unnecessarily risk romanticizing, idealizing, or otherwise standardizing our modern context and conceptual paradigms. As a consequence, these histories can tread dangerously close to providing teleological explanations for historical events. Here, Frederick Cooper’s critique of globalization studies in *Colonialism in Question* seems to be particularly apt. “Like modernization theory,” Cooper writes “globalization draws its power from uniting diverse phenomena into a singular conceptual framework and a singular notion of change. And that is where both approaches occlude rather than clarify historical processes.”²⁰ World and global historical projects that work to sync world historical events into a continuum of increasingly intertwined human connections can problematically oversimplify and standardize the nature of historical actors and linkages and deny the transitory nature of historical spaces. Not only are local and global spaces understood with great variance by those living and participating within them,²¹ but historical actors—whether a civilization, a concept or a multinational corporation—are constantly redefined and reshaped over time. Finding parallels between the “globalization” of a region or the interactions of an empire of 1000 years ago to one 800 years later is theoretically dubious and can risk

¹⁹William I Robinson, “Beyond Nation-State Paradigms: Globalization, Sociology, and the Challenge of Transnational Studies,” *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 4 (Dec 1998), 574.

²⁰ Frederick Cooper, *Ibid*, 111.

²¹ Erik Swyngedouw explores this issue in “Neither Global nor Local: ‘Glocalization’ and the Politics of Scale,” Kevin Cox, ed., *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting Power of the Local* (The Guilford Press, 1997), 137-166.

generalizing or overlooking important regional and local historical contextualities that influenced and shaped global processes.

These issues raise a final concern for global histories: that of ethnocentrism. World, global and transnational histories locate their units of analysis and highlight particular connections with an emphasis upon the categories, processes and events that appear, and have appeared, in the Western world. While this issue is one that concerns all historians, world, global and transnational histories seeking to make connections across broad periods of time may be particularly prone to emphasizing uniquely western paradigms. World histories commonly compare empires, power centers, or elites. Global histories seek out previous periods of “globalization”—an inherently modern and, arguably, Western concept. In order to standardize historical connections over long periods of time into neatly arranged linear narratives that lead to or are comparable to the present, world and global histories may explain historical events by focusing upon contexts, connections or actors that are analogous to contemporary, western institutions and constructs. Yet this methodology is often biased towards explaining historical events from a uniquely Western perspective and can overlook or deny the different and multiple, non-Western worldviews, institutions or people that can and have facilitated human connections in the past. It is unclear and uncertain whether using Western categories of analysis is wholly accurate or useful for explaining non-Western events and connections in antiquity. Peter Gran, who has written extensively about this dilemma in *Beyond Eurocentrism*, emphasizes, “Standard world history is, in fact, so focused on the western countries, their elites and high cultures, that it does not permit much critical analysis of them. This world history...is still written the way national history used to be written in the nineteenth century--one center--a Europe, a West, a few actors, cultures, or artifacts, eras of war and peace, information on commerce and other forms of

interaction...”²² While Gran’s remarks certainly do not represent the whole of world, global or transnational literature, his warning is a useful one. With the potential to overemphasize or rely upon Western categories of analysis, world and global histories may risk overlooking or misrepresenting important historical connections and events that were propelled by non-Western phenomena.

To avoid these potential teleological or ethnocentric pitfalls, it may perhaps be more useful for world, global and transnational historians to focus their lines of inquiry in ways that more substantially and judiciously address *why* human connections begin, transform or are lost over time. Rather than plotting out periods of historical connections that are ostensibly comparable across centuries of history, it may be more fruitful to center upon the societal, cultural, economic and institutional mechanisms and conditions that underlay specific periods of human linkages in order to understand how and why historical connections were understood and facilitated by local actors residing in dissimilar spaces. Focusing more squarely upon the local driving forces of global or regional historical connections (local social structures, political formations, religious ideologies or cultural worldviews, etc), and examining how global or regional processes migrated through them, may allow us to more accurately analyze and explain why connections expanded or contracted in some places and not others, and more clearly appreciate what the implications of those connections meant to the people experiencing them.²³ Further, exploring how and why locally specific institutions and social mechanisms facilitated global connections can allow historians to explain global trends in terms of locally specific

²² Peter Gran. *Beyond Eurocentrism*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press: 1996), 4.

²³ For an excellent example of one such study that focuses upon a local history in order to understand world historical processes see David Wright’s *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, the Gambia, Third Edition*. (London: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2010).

frames of analysis that may not have otherwise been accurately explained with traditionally Western historical paradigms.

Additionally, focusing more intently upon locally specific sites of global connections can allow world, global and transnational historians to avoid the teleological tendencies of globalization or modernization narratives. As Cooper emphasizes, “the movement of people as well as capital reveals the lumpiness of cross-border connections, not a pattern of steadily increasing integration.”²⁴ That is, history has not been marked by a steady rise of regional and global interconnections, it has largely been comprised of complex, circumstantial and disjointed periods of connections. Research that can better explain the fundamental, local drivers of these global and regional connections can offer us more accurate explanations of why discontinuous cross-regional and global relationships flourished, perished or transformed over time. More thorough and complete world, global and transnational histories will be result if more homage is paid to historical specificities rather than relying upon totalizing narratives that piece together disconnected periods of historical change.

The semantic haziness that blurs the distinction between world, global and transnational historical approaches does not seem ready to disappear in the near future. However, much of this ambiguity seems to arise from the variances in framework, periodization and focus of these studies themselves. As world and global history march forward, historians of the subject should feel challenged to identify the processes that transcend both space and time in order to develop a more standardized and comprehensive understanding of the political, economic, sociological and cultural structures that account for human connections throughout history and avoid the teleological tendencies of grand narratives or theories of a steadily integrated global system. By

²⁴ Cooper, *Ibid*, 95.

exploring and investigating the underlying characteristics of human interactions, world and global historians will be better able to comprehend not just the *who*, *what*, and *when* of global connections, but also the *why* and *how* these connections have increased, spread and varied over time. My contention is that historians should carefully consider their usage of the terms ‘global,’ ‘transnational’ and ‘world’ before employing them in historical projects. Semantic confusion will continue as long as global historical studies use these terms sporadically and without consistent and standardized methodological and theoretical frameworks within which they can place these indistinct terms. Research on understanding the large-scale trends in human history is important. Developing more consistent approaches to these studies will only aid their advancement, effectiveness and comprehension in the future.

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