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GLOBAL HISTORY

The study of global history has been inspired by the contemporary interest in globalization, but it is not an affirmative history of a singular transformation. Instead, it reconstructs global change in natural and human history and unravels the entangled threads of nature and humankind. As a field of historical studies, global history reflects the fact that natural and human histories are plural, as are globalizations. This entry presents world and global history as the main historiographical answers to global change.

Two Agents of Global Change

For eons, global history was nature-made. Then human history came along, altering in diverse ways the natural course of events. For ages, though, history was local before it became global. Yet once that had happened (the exact time of transition from local to global is a contentious matter), global natural and global human histories were no longer independent of each other. They can certainly still be distinguished analytically, but in reality they now interact heavily. The entire Earth is the crucial playing field of these two global histories, and it remains to be seen which history is going to “win.”

Global change due to natural history is as old as the planet. Indeed, such change can come from outer space and be hugely relevant from a terrestrial point of view. A case in point is the accidental formation of the Earth’s moon, caused by a Mars-size planet hitting the young Earth and sending trillions of tons of debris into orbit, which then coalesced and formed the celestial body that

now orbits the planet. The Moon governs the tides and causes eclipses, and in so doing it has influenced the way various natural and human histories have unfolded. It may also have been instrumental for creating life on Earth, via the mixing of chemicals through tidal currents. Much later on, the relative mathematical simplicity of the Earth-Moon system made it possible (or at least easier) for natural philosophers from Copernicus to Newton to lay the foundations of modern science.

Plate tectonics is an internal feature of the Earth that causes global change on a planetary scale. Fourteen major plates, and a number of minor ones, form the rocky crust of the Earth; their complex movements are responsible for the making and unmaking of oceans, the drift of continents, the rise of mountains, and outbreaks of volcanoes and earthquakes. Thus, playing with the geologic and geographic boundary conditions of life, plate tectonics has always had (and will probably always have) profound long-term historical consequences, ranging from the development of unique languages in formerly isolated areas to the controversial explanation of why some parts of the globe are wealthy and others are not, explicated by historians such as Jared Diamond.

Life on Earth has caused global change for at least three billion years, and in the last 10,000 years this change has occurred at increasing speed. Calling on the oldest fossils—of aquatic and photosynthetic cyanobacteria that are more than 3.5 billion years old—global natural history tells the story of how these bacteria changed the Earth’s original atmosphere and eventually contributed to the emergence of plants. Adding large amounts of oxygen to the atmosphere of a barren planet, they helped to create the biosphere of a fertile Earth. Countless evolutionary processes later, during one of the global cooling periods some 130,000 years ago, anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) evolved in Africa. Natural globetrotters, they replaced the older Neanderthals in Europe and all other human species on the planet in the following 100,000 years.

Global change through human history is a development of the last 10,000 years. All the preconditions for this had been fulfilled: biologically modern humans had evolved; the last glacial maximum had been reached around 20,000 BCE; and hunter-gatherers had developed the technical and social

skills that enabled them to work progressively on nature as well as on themselves. The approximately six million humans alive at the time of the global warming that occurred around 9600 BCE were people at the brink of a true novelty—human-driven global change. An important antecedent of this break with the past was the domestication of fire. The Paleolithic technology of making and keeping fire had brought the natural phenomenon of wildfire under human control, providing warmth, light, increased protection, and new foodstuffs by way of cooking. Furthermore, it demonstrated that Promethean know-how could appropriate an awe-inspiring force of nature.

The Neolithic Revolution made human history a growing agent of global change, though not in one wholesale sweep, as initially assumed, but gradually, haltingly, unknowingly, and along different regional trajectories. Spurred by the challenges of global warming (e.g., the loss of coastal lands, interruptions of migratory herds, floods, and dense new forests), some groups of hunter-gatherers went beyond mere adaptation to their changing environments. Experiments with wild cereals and animals turned these humans into an entirely new category—farmers and herders tending domesticated wheat and barley, rice and squash, maize and beans, and cattle, goats, and sheep. The domestication of plants and animals changed the genetic make-up of the organisms that came under human control and developed global human history in many other ways. Farmers worked the lands of the globe according to their needs, in the process landscaping much of the planet. They transformed themselves socioculturally and with “crowd diseases” (new germs, originally picked up from cattle, pigs, and dogs), and they may even have affected the global climate. Farming led to cascades of technological innovations in villages, towns, and cities. It spawned writing, religions, and architecture; it created craftsmen, traders, chiefs, warlords, priests, and kings; and it centralized government and eminent cultures (“world civilizations”) with persistent inequalities of wealth, privilege, and power.

In the early 21st century, an unprecedented phase of global warming is topping the last one. The present global warming is human-made, hastened by deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Like the Agricultural Revolution, which began

in the Fertile Crescent of Southwest Asia before it became globalized, the Industrial Revolution had local origins: it started in some parts of England in the late 18th century, and it is still spreading around the world. Contemporary human global history has been driven by the consolidation of capitalism (in the late 20th century), the dynamics of modern technoscience in the physical (nuclear) and biological (genetic) areas, and the exigencies of an increasingly urbanized world population, standing at 6.5 billion people in the first decade of the 21st century. To call the present moment in global history hazardous is hardly an exaggeration, yet there are also tremendous possibilities. The “human domination of Earth’s ecosystems” (Vitousek et al. 1997) could turn into a responsible management of Earth. Even Karl Marx’s dream about “complete unity of man with nature—the true resurrection of nature—the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature” could come true.

Two Histories of Global Change

Studying global change over time is the business of many disciplines. When historians engage in it, they generally prefer to trace the vestiges of human agency in the records of global change. The specialties of historiography that are of interest here are *world history* and *global history*. World history, the older field, shares roots in Christian thought and Western philosophy with cognates like *universal* and *ecumenical* history. Together with anthropology and ethnography, world history was an ideological beneficiary of 500 years of post-Columbian Western imperial history. The traditional focus of world history on world civilizations may now be yielding to global history’s focus on natural and human globalizations. These disciplinary adjustments parallel the appearance of a new world empire that is, for the first time in history, coextensive with the globe (the emerging empire of the United States).

World history in its preglobal forms reaches far back in time. Oral myths and ancient local religions interpreted the small worlds of hunter-gatherers and farmers as the “whole world.” They told the listeners around a Paleolithic campfire or in a Neolithic temple why they were there and how the world and everything in it had come into being. The religious myth-histories of preliterate and, later, literate peoples affirmed the existing world order and left nothing of local

importance unexplained. The advent of so-called world religions in Asia and Europe during the “Axial Period” (as Karl Jaspers calls it) between 800 and 200 BCE brought professional religious and philosophical thinking to the fore with figures like Isaiah in Palestine, Zoroaster in Persia, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) in India, Confucius in China, and Socrates in Greece. Moving beyond local narratives, these individuals approached a reasoned universalism and an appreciation of change. The territorial conquests of the great empires in China (Qin and Han), India (Mauryan), and the West (Hellenistic and Roman) mirrored this intellectual expansion geographically.

The space of world history was filled after 1492 with local worlds dotting an increasingly global world map. The globe had always contained numerous local worlds, yet nobody had ever before wielded a global purview that could take them all in. Seeing the location and spatial separation of the political and cultural realms of, for example, Rome, China, and the New World required a panoptic view of the entire planet. This was the advantage of world history in the age of modernity. Primed by the Voyages of Discovery, early-modern Europe acquired a global geospatial framework, which allowed world history to map the spatial distribution of history from its translocal vantage point. In 1681, Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet instructed the prince of France that universal history “is to the history of every country and every people what a world map is to particular maps . . . you see what Paris or the Île-de-France is in the kingdom, what the kingdom is in Europe, and what Europe is in the world.”

Civilizations have been world history’s main unit of analysis. World civilizations were, for world history, what emperors, kings, and generals had been for history before social history (civilizations still dominate U.S. textbooks for secondary- and college-level world history teaching). Critics have taken issue with this way of analyzing the past, pointing to the essentialism of the concept of civilization; the question of what constitutes civilizational identity; the difficulty in distinguishing between civilization and culture; the problem of spatial demarcation (which arose with the uncertain boundaries of the European civilization); and the privileging of urban lettered elites over the “people without history” (Wolf 1997). The works of literature, philosophy, science, art, and architecture counted in world history’s measure of civilizations, but the

labor of farmers who provided for city dwellers for millennia (at the ratio of ten to one) did not. Any list of the most distinguished practitioners of world history would include Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), and William McNeill (b. 1917).

Spengler became instantly famous in Germany with the first volume of *Decline of the West* (1918), which predicted the looming downfall of Western (“Faustian”) culture as a world-historical inevitability. Undercutting the Allied victory in World War I with a comparative morphology of eight “great cultures,” Spengler’s world history propelled all civilizations across a millennial life cycle arcing from birth to death (through the seasons of spring, summer, fall, and civilizational winter). Spengler’s work inspired Toynbee’s *A Study of History* (12 volumes, 1934–1961). Enlarging the number of units from eight to 21, and replacing Spengler’s growth-to-decay cadence with the empirically more open mechanism of challenge and response, Toynbee nevertheless found similar “rhythms” in his sample of world civilizations. After two world wars, he too struggled with the ultimate fate of the “postmodern” (Toynbee’s term) Latin-Christian Western civilization and its constituent states. To Toynbee, Western civilization had been breaking down since the religious wars of the 16th century. Yet doom was not certain; Toynbee believed that God—Bossuet’s “Divine Providence”—could always make a difference and rescue the West. McNeill’s *The Rise of the West* (1963) repudiated Spengler’s gloom in its title and developed a hopeful alternative to Toynbee in its content. Part Three unfolded an “era of Western dominance” from 1500 to 1950. For McNeill, the West grew up during the “long 19th century” (1850–1950) and established Western “cosmopolitanism on a global scale.”

Global history is a recent field of historiography. Following World War II, which had brought the Europe-centered phase of Western power to an end, some historians noted the possibility, if not the necessity, of writing contemporary history as global history. This feeling has grown since then and is now shared widely. Significantly, historical studies that do not overtly aim to be global have nonetheless begun to notice and discuss the global aspects of their topics. The once new global perspective is thus becoming normal in the discipline of researching and writing history.

Questions of legacy and methodology, however, are still debated, including the real or imagined differences between world and global history and the uncertainty of where to “reOrient” global history—away from Eurocentrism is only part of the answer (Frank 1998). Two “technical” issues that are equally controversial also exist, namely, how should global history configure the fundamental categories of space and time.

The space of global history has a fractal quality. The geobody is the “hard core” of global space but there is no hard-edged limit to it. Human technoscience can project global history into outer space, and things from outer space do not have to respect Earth’s physical integrity. The internal space of global history is similarly unlimited and compounded. The local and the global are intertwined from the transplanetary “global mind” of human consciousness all the way down to the local tea or coffee shop. The dialectic of “inside” and “outside” has collapsed, and the whole planet has become the playground for global history in physical, biological, sociocultural, and mental terms. Formerly separate human affairs have acquired a simultaneous local-global presence (glocality) in gadgets and homes, musical ideas, and industrial production, and on suburban street corners as well as in worldwide communication networks.

The fuzzy zone surrounding the local worlds and empires of world history has disappeared, and all that extraneous space, which was unfamiliar to everybody but the indigenous people and a few long-distance traders, has been thoroughly mapped and otherwise appropriated by nation-states. However, the perimeter of traditional territorial space is turning into an anachronism. Berlin Walls can still be built and patrolled, but only as monuments to some kind of failure. The glory of the Great Wall of the Qin, Han, and Ming cannot be recaptured. National jurisdiction over territorial space will not become history any time soon, but global history is reworking that space with multiple layers of “supraterritorial social relations” (Scholte 2005). Transnational networks pierce the territorial autonomy and a thickening bundle of transworld connections create a multilayered geography. Understanding and charting this new geography is a work in progress and cannot be accomplished by a single discipline. The metageographies of center and periphery, First and Third World, East and West, and North

and South are no longer adequate, and the organization of the academy along disciplinary lines does not help in solving problems that transcend these boundaries. How to research global problems and grasp the fractal nature of global space and its local differences is unclear, yet the task seems to be obvious. The globality of global history thus requires further both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies.

Global history adjusts historical time in two ways. It emphasizes the relative importance of the present in the temporal framework of past, present, and future times; and it calls for a new periodization of history. Because global patterns exist within local contexts (global tourists roaming everywhere) and local patterns within global phenomena (software, for instance, that works on any computer but has been “localized” to interface with human operators in different languages), the local and the global have practically lost what spatio-temporal distance they may have had and turned into simultaneous aspects of reality. Since the 19th century, a radical “time-space compression” has been the main cause for this change. From railroads and steamships to cars and container ships, and from electrical telegraphy to the World Wide Web, revolutionary advancements in transportation and communication have brought virtually everything into close contact. And as the world has shrunk, the weight of the present has increased, synchrony has gained the upper hand (over historical diachrony), and global contemporaneity of all people has become the sociotemporal order of global history.

The periodization of global history is an unsolved and contentious problem, as it should be. Historical periodizations are always open to debate and never final. Furthermore, the “global age” is a new age for some but not for others. It is possible, however, to identify a key event in global history that divides historical time into a *before* and *after*, not just for some parts of the world, but globally. This epochal event—the Western “discovery” of America—is known to the point of embarrassment, yet that contact marked the beginning of the end of separate local destinies for humankind. The subsequent contacts with Australia and other “new worlds” in the Pacific Ocean and elsewhere were not accidental. The systematic discovery and domination of hitherto discrete human worlds on the surface of the planet was, until recently, the competitive and consensual

project of all Western powers. The periodization that follows from this before-and-after distinction divides global history into three epochs: preglobal, protoglobal, and global.

This skeleton of a periodization sequences human history from a contemporary global perspective. First comes the time when not all of the planet was known to humankind (preglobal, up to 1500), then the period during which the revealing of the whole face of the Earth became a Western priority (protoglobal, from 1500 to 1950), and finally the time when the processes of globalization increased by orders of magnitude and reached a critical mass (global, after 1950). This historical framework is compatible with social-scientific attempts to periodize the “temporal-historical path to the present circumstance of a very high degree of global density and complexity” in, for example, a five-phase model of globalization since the early 15th century (Robertson 1992), or via a large premodern period up to 1500 and three shorter periods after that watershed (Held et al. 1999). Fleshing out the subdivisions of these periodizations is critical and will test the sturdiness of the basic historical frame, giving chapter and verse to the narrative of global history.

There is widespread agreement that the transformation from protoglobal to global history has happened in the historical moment of “postcolonial globalization” (Hopkins 2002) between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War. One of the first historians to take note was Geoffrey Barraclough (1908–1984), a distinguished medieval and modern historian who came to understand universal history as global history. Speaking about “the end of European history,” he declared in 1955 that the time for a truly universal history had come because “our global age knows neither geographical nor cultural frontiers.” However, the idea of “global history” did not take off before the end of the 20th century.

In 1990 the *Journal of World History* started publication in Honolulu with an editorial that announced a “new forum for global history.” World history was thus positioning itself as the history of a globalizing world. This new global world history has retained much of the old idea of world civilizations, yet with a local flavor: it is almost exclusively taught in United States high schools and colleges. Scholarly examples of the new world history include John McNeill’s *Something New under the Sun* (2000), an environmental history of the

20th century, and Patrick Manning’s *Navigating World History* (2003), an attempt to go beyond the nationalistic classroom and establish the new world history as a research field. Another endeavor to come to terms with the present time and its consequences for the past is the “New Global History Initiative.” Convened in 1989 by Bruce Mazlish, this small group of scholars made its publishing debut in 1993 with *Conceptualizing Global History*. Since then, the group has produced edited volumes and articles that bring a thematic and comparative approach to global history, as in *Food in Global History* (1999), edited by Raymond Grew. Incorporating natural and human history as interactive agents of global change, group members have rethought key historical terms such as *civilization*. A truly universal history—a history of the whole universe—is *Maps of Time* (2004) by David Christian. His “big history” begins with the Big Bang and ends with humans migrating “to planets or moons within the solar system, and perhaps even farther afield.” Embracing a “modern creation myth,” the storyline of the embedded history of humankind goes from many worlds through few worlds to one world.

The writing of global history is inspired by the possibilities of the present time, and it is thus situated in a context of systematic uncertainty. With global consciousness and transglobal social connections on the one hand, and the global social, political, and ecological power of human activities on the other, a potent brew has been created. Global human power generates conflicting challenges: global civil society seeks cosmopolitan social justice; the postcolonial empire of the United States demands worldwide allegiance; and the human domination of nature supports the industrial (and postindustrial) way of the “good life” but can also engender death by nuclear warfare, ecological disaster, or irreversible degradation of the biosphere. Applying the contemporary mentality of global history to the reconstruction of human affairs in the past promises to throw more light on the origins of the present situation.

See Also

Civil Society; Civilization; Climate Change; Cosmopolitanism; Deforestation; Deterritorialization; Global Consciousness; Globalism; Globality; Globalization; Glocalization; Industrial Revolution; Maps; Modernity; Networks; Postcolonialism;

Religion; Science; Space; Technology; Telegraph; Territoriality; Time; Tourism; Transportation; Universalism; Urbanization; Voyages of Discovery

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GLOBALISM

The term *globalism* refers to a powerful political ideology that supports extending the Anglo-American model of liberal capitalism and its underlying norms and values to all regions of the world. Drawing on ideas formulated over the 19th and 20th centuries by classical liberal thinkers like Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer, and resurrected in the late 1970s and early 1980s by political leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, globalism is organized around a number of core concepts and prescriptions, such as