

## Global Histories in International Relations

Written by Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, Filipe Dos Reis and Maj Grasten

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# Global Histories in International Relations

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ZEYNEP GÜLŞAH ÇAPAN, FILIPE DOS REIS AND MAJ GRASTEN, JUL 22 2018

As students of International Relations (IR) have increasingly turned to historicizing the international, historians have opened up their discipline to international, transnational and global circuits and connections.[1] Global History, in particular, has figured in debates within the discipline of history to the extent that observers note a “boom”[2], “trend”[3], and “turn”[4]. It has even been suggested that Global History is the “fastest-growing field within the discipline” of history[5]. As a consequence, global historical literature has proliferated. There are now a vast number of introductions to the field, compendia, bridging exercises to other research areas (running through labels such as “global intellectual history”[6] or “global historical sociology”[7]) and more empirical “global histories of X” (with “X” being nearly any imaginable topic). Study programmes are mushrooming and thematic journals such as *The Journal of World History* and the *Journal of Global History*[8] have been established. This development has been located within a more general “global’ revolution in the social sciences” and humanities.[9]

In this brief article we argue for the relevance of Global History for the “historical turn” in IR and sketch out what in particular should be brought into IR from the burgeoning literature on Global History. Our intervention comes at a time when Global History has come under attack from within the discipline of history itself; with rapid success comes critique, with Global History accused of incoherence and imprecision.[10] A prevalent criticism targets Global History’s complicity with the project of neoliberal globalization and its normative currency.[11] This, however, may be an overly reductionist reading of Global History. If we decouple global history from globalization and in doing, move beyond an understanding that reduces global history to the “history of globalization”, the turn to Global History might bear fruit for IR scholars.

A broader conception of Global History can serve both as a way into problematizing Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism in historical research and international studies and, relatedly, incorporating a sensibility to connections and comparisons that can potentially work towards decentering and decolonizing IR[12]. The intention here is not to pin down what Global History is, or should be and provide a clear-cut definition. This is nearly impossible because of the term’s proliferation and its proximity to (and often overlap with) other categorizations such as “international”, “world”, “transnational” or “big history”. Rather, in what follows we outline and discuss three different conceptions of Global History that have distinct repercussions in and for IR; first, Global History as process and integration; second, Global History as extension in space and time; and, third, Global History as entanglement. The latter we refer to as “Global Histories”.

Global History as *process and integration* incorporates events, ideas and subjects into a linear history of globalization, emphasizing the emergence of interdependency. However, a focus on globalization as an incremental and integrative process implies an often quasi-teleological understanding of history. In other words, a history of globalization takes “existing processes, encapsulated in the “factors of globalization” and traces them as far back in the past as seems necessary and useful”. [13] As Joseph Conrad remarked, such an approach “streamlines history and formats it to the single criterion of connectedness” creating a “myth of continuity”, where the “quest for the origins of globalization” – as there has to be a “definite starting point” – teeters on obsession.[14] However, some argue for its relevance to questioning methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism. Lynn Hunt, for instance, points to the co-constitutive role of the “non-West” and the role played by intermediaries: the “West did not globalize the world on its own; adventurous and enterprising people across the world brought various locales into greater interconnection and interdependence with each other. Since globalization is not therefore a uniquely Western

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creation, the globalization paradigm must be modified to take account of these multiple origins and processes".[15] However, the linear progressive narrative of globalization which underpins the *process and integration* approach to Global History is not fully redressed by these interventions. Despite incorporating more diverse sources of historical development in its explanatory apparatus it does not transcend the starting point. Additions are still plotted into a progressive, linear and universalizing story of globalization.

Global History as *space and time* operates as a hermeneutic device for extending the analytical scale of a particular subject of historical research. This global approach to history is at times also referred to as World History or Big History. Scholars of World History were motivated by escaping the constraints of national history, broadening the scope of historical inquiry by comparing different "civilizations", and their rise and decline. Among first generation publications here were Oswald Spengler's two-volume *The Decline of the West* (1918, 1922) and Arnold Toynbee's ten-volume *Study of History* (1933-1954) comparing eight and 21 civilizations, respectively. However, world historians did not fully escape the constraints of national historical research. The civilizations under scrutiny remained hermetically sealed. Rise and decline were explained by internal dynamics, with civilizations treated in a similar way to the closed container of the state in national history.

Since, World History underwent two renaissances. The first in the 1960s and 1970s, initiated by the publication of William McNeill's influential *The Rise of the West* (1963), despite the incorporation of cultural influences from other civilizations remained substantively Eurocentric in its understanding of the modern world as a product of Western civilization's expansion. While the first renaissance broadened historical analyses spatially by encompassing various civilizations, a second renaissance in the 1990s attempted to balance the treatment of distinct civilizations.[16] The focus of "Big History" in contrast is temporal. The aim here is not only to excavate the human past but embed this in the history of the universe, sometimes as far back as the Big Bang (for this reason, this particular approach has engaged with natural sciences).[17] "World History" and "Big History", with their focus on placing history and its subjects on larger spatial and temporal scales "as if viewed from a cosmic crow's nest" [18], miss the connections through which the "global" is constructed, and continuously reconstructed. The problem is the treatment of time and space as static, singular, and apolitical.

Global History as *entanglements* does not conceive the "global" as a single unit of analysis, nor treat events, ideas, and subjects as factors to be incorporated into a larger globalizing historical process. A more adequate label may be Global Histories as the focus is on connections both in and between different units of analysis, in a multiverse, thereby destabilizing assumptions of historical unity.[19] Global History as entanglements, that is Global Histories, serves to overcome the methodological nationalism that defines most historical writing and, consequently, confronts Eurocentrism. This confrontation proceeds by approaching events, ideas, and subjects as inextricably entwined, rather than occurring within bounded entities (such as the nation-state or self-contained civilizations). Whereas the two approaches outlined above trace historical events and evolutions back to specific starting points, the Global Histories approach does not conceive of time and space as static totalities, but as mutable in historical processes of globe-making and in various situated practices of projecting particular meanings into the notion of "global".

Global Histories moves away from comparisons between what appear as bounded entities on the basis of common standards and criteria, towards identifying and tracing connections and circulations, that is, entanglements. Nation-states and civilizations do not exist in isolation, nor are they fixed historical entities. A focus on entanglements means that points of origin and spatial schemes can neither be taken as given, nor employed as fixed points of reference for tracking a linear historical process. They are constructed through entanglements. It is the entanglement of events, ideas, and subjects that create particular and passing temporal and spatial hierarchies which constitute the "global".

This contribution argues for the relevance of the burgeoning field of Global History for IR. However, different approaches to Global History do not only operate with diverging notions of the "global" but also with different ideas of what history is and should be.[20] In addressing three approaches (i.e. process and integration, space and time, and entanglements), we identify what should be brought in (and what should best be left out) from a History discipline marked by methodological nationalism. Global Histories offers a means for International Relations to engage Global History in a way that can problematize and transcend the Eurocentric assumptions underpinning historical research in the discipline.

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### Notes

**NB:** An extended version of this argument is made in 'Global Histories' in *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations*, ed. Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa López, and Halvard Leira (forthcoming)

[1] See, for example, Xavier Guillaume, 'Historizing the International', *E-International Relations* (blog), 8 June 2013, [www.e-ir.info/2013/06/08/historicizing-the-international/](http://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/08/historicizing-the-international/).

[2] Franz L. Fillafer, 'A World Connecting? From the Unity of History to Global History', *History and Theory* 56, no. 1 (2017), 3.

[3] Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

[4] Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, 'Approaches to Global Intellectual History', in *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 3.

[5] Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1.

[6] Moyn and Sartori, 'Approaches to Global Intellectual History'.

[7] Julian Go and George Lawson, 'Introduction: For a Global Historical Sociology', in *Global Historical Sociology*, ed. Julian Go and George Lawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[8] Outside of the Anglophone world, for example, the German outline *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* runs since 2008.

[9] Go and Lawson, 'Introduction', 1.

[10] See Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (2018), 1; see also Fillafer, 'A World Connecting?'.

[11] See for further discussion Drayton and Motadel, 'The Futures of Global History'.

[12] Zeynep Gulsah Capan, 'Decolonising International Relations?', *Third World Quarterly* 38, no.1 (2017).

[13] Bruce Mazlish, 'Comparing Global History to World History', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (1998), 389.

[14] Joseph Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 99–100.

[15] Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 70.

[16] For an overview of different strands of World History see Ross E. Dunn, Laura Jane Mitchell, and Kerry Ward, eds., *The New World History: A Field Guide for Teachers and Researchers* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). For an attempt to introduce World History to IR see Andrew Linklater, 'World History and International Relations', *International Relations* 21, no. 3 (2007): 355–59.

[17] See the seminal contributions by Fred Spier, *The Structure of Big History from the Big Bang until Today* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996); David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[18] Felipe Fernández-Armesto and Benjamin Sacks, 'Networks, Interactions, and Connective History', in *A*

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*Companion to World History*, ed. Douglas Northrop (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 303.

[19] See Fillafer, 'A World Connecting?'

[20] Zeynep Gulsah Capan. *Re-writing International Relations: History and Theory beyond Eurocentrism in Turkey* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

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