

## DOING GLOBAL HISTORY: REFLECTIONS, DOUBTS AND COMMITMENTS

Fazendo História Global: reflexões,  
dúvidas e compromissos

Haciendo Historia Global: reflexiones,  
dudas y compromisos

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S2178-14942017000100013>

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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the present article is to present some reflections and doubts that have emerged during and after the Global History Conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. For that purpose, the importance of the spatiality and temporality for the studies of the so-called "global turn" will be discussed and analyzed. Another point that will be discussed along this article is the impact of the globalization on the field of History and on its subfields. Finally, there will be a discussion on how Global History has been produced in Latin America and its similarities and differences with the Global History produced in Europe

**KEY WORDS:** Global History, theory, Historiography, globalization, global turn, Latin America.

## RESUMO

O principal objetivo do presente artigo é apresentar algumas reflexões e dúvidas que surgiram durante e após a Conferência Global de História realizada no Rio de Janeiro em 2016. Nesse sentido, a importância da espacialidade e da temporalidade para os estudos da chamada "virada global" será discutida e analisada. Outro ponto que será discutido ao longo do artigo é o impacto da globalização no campo da História e em seus subcampos. Finalmente, haverá uma discussão sobre o modo como a História Global tem sido escrita na América Latina e suas similaridades e diferenças com a História Global escrita na Europa.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** História Global, teoria, Historiografia, globalização, virada global, América Latina.

## RESUMEN

El propósito principal del presente artículo es presentar algunas reflexiones y dudas que han surgido durante y después de la Conferencia Global de Historia que se organizó en Río de Janeiro en 2016. Para este propósito, la importancia de la espacialidad y de la temporalidad para los estudios del llamado "giro global" será discutida y analizada. Otro punto que se discutirá a lo largo del artículo es el impacto de la globalización en el campo de la Historia y en sus subcampos. Por último, habrá un debate sobre la forma en que se escribe la Historia Global en América Latina y sus similitudes y diferencias con la Historia Global que se escribe en Europa.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Historia Global, teoría, Historiografía, globalización, giro global, América Latina.

**T**his essay analyses the discussions presented at the Global History Conference held in Rio de Janeiro in October 2016.<sup>1</sup> This was a rich and complex conference in which scholars from three continents and with different methodological approaches were invited to reflect on what global history was about and what the place of Latin America in the global history field was. The discussions were lively – even passionate – and the conference offered a fascinating window into the different ways in which we, historians of Latin America, embrace, adapt, or resist the global turn. As expected, there were multiple and sometimes even contradictory proposals. During the conference we listened to presentations about different methodological tools: connections, comparisons, convergences, and so on. We also read papers from different subfields and approaches: diplomatic history, history of I. R., economic history, transnational history, intellectual history... As Alexandre Moreli asserted during the conference, many times these are “traditions that do not dialogue with each other”. That the use of the expression global turn was almost as frequent as global history itself is perhaps evidence of the absence of a theoretical and methodological construct that we can agree on as the basis for global history. In this sense, global history is more of a syndrome than a theory.

I am not going to propose here a precise definition of global history. What I will try to do is provide more of a reflection on our civic commitments as (global) historians. I have chosen this option for this essay at least for two reasons. First, I am not a theoretical kind of researcher. When someone asks me if I do global history, I always hesitate and usually avoid a clear answer. Second, whereas the conference engaged in an intense debate about the definitions of the global, it paid less attention to the issue of the present political implications of our embracement of the global framework. This is something that deserves at least as much thought as our methodological skirmishes.

Let me begin these reflections with my personal encounter with global history, which explains why this approach was appealing to me in the first place. It was at Ohio State University between 2003 and 2005. After attending several seminars, conferences and debates I realized that I found the conversations about Asia and Africa more interesting than those about Latin America. I had some feelings of remorse, thinking that my attention was diverted to things I should not focus on, and that I was falling into the temptations of dilettantism. But on the other hand, I realized that there were good reasons for the awakening of my new interests.

In many places in the United States academia the study of Latin America had been fully taken by the so-called cultural studies. These posed two problems for me. First, on many occasions this was an approach that essentialized Latin American realities and marginalized historical analysis. Second, cultural studies created a significant gap between the interests of those Latin American historians working from Latin American institutions and the interests of Latin Americanists in the US universities. Yet, in my two years in Ohio, I did not hear any critical reflection about the possible problems that this gap could cause.

In addition to this reality, in Ohio I came across three books which responded to many of my anxieties and intellectual wanderings at this moment. In 2003, Chris Bayly's, *The Birth of Modern World* came out. The book was an immediate sensation, although at an early moment it did not catch Latin Americanists' attention. For a historian of Latin America the book had some limits. Guy Thompson (2007: 72-73) rightly noticed how Bayly neglected the fights for democratization and the political agency of Latin American's native population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, it was obvious that Bayly's interpretations of Latin America (and the Iberian Peninsula as well) were based on very few references, all of them in English and some of them very old. And yet, Bayly's book seemed to me an extraordinary contribution for its ability to decenter the narrative about modernity and to create a (mostly Eurasian) tapestry in which fascinating details and structural frameworks were woven, in a truly Braudelian spirit.

The second book was Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* (2000). As is well known, Pomeranz sought to explain the economic divergence between Europe and China since the 18<sup>th</sup> century by emphasizing the environmental effects of the colonial bounty for Western nations. Pomeranz's proposal opened promising insights by introducing environmental constraints into the picture of the arrival of economic modernity and by posing again the question of global inequalities. Since I was working on the economic history of Latin America and since I was interested in what seemed at that moment old-fashioned questions about space inequality, *The Great Divergence* caught my attention.

The third book was Roy Bin Wong's *China Transformed and the Limits of European Experience* (1997). Wong returned to the *École des Annales'* ideas about comparison as a key tool of historical analysis, in particular Marc Bloch's proposal. But Wong offered a way to transcend the Eurocentric basis of the comparative method, that is, the real risk that the comparison we aim to carry out begins with a question that usually implies a normative model. For instance, the question of why some specific modernizing process took place in one region and not in others implies that the absence of a feature is being interpreted as a historical anomaly. Wong encouraged us to change perspectives and to assume that the normative

case is not the usual one in order to pose alternative and fresh questions (in fact, March Bloch himself suggested the idea of reciprocal comparisons). I found the results enlightening. The question remains, nevertheless, if comparison is an instrument for global history since as Jan de Vries (2013: 38) has asserted is not easy to avoid privileging one spatial area in the formulation of the comparative term.

Some authors have emphasized that the global turn continues or derives from some of the preoccupations of postmodern or postcolonial studies. Thus, Maxine Berg has asserted that the global “emerged from postmodernism and postcolonial directions where crossing boundaries and going beyond borders joined aspirations to write a new imperial history and to undertake comparative studies of the West and the East” (Berg, 2013: 3).

David Landes, in a confusing part of a confusing book, asserted that the attempt to discover pre-conditions for economic modernity in different parts of the world was part of a postmodern relativist project of finding good things in every society. For Landes this is part of ‘anti-intellectual’ ‘Europhobia’ (Landes, 1999: 514). But in truth, Landes confused without further consideration the authors who discussed the existence of special virtues of some ideal entity called Europe with those who defend the existence of primordial cultural traits and thus falls into the same anti-intellectual traps he claims to denounce.

More interesting is Patrick O’Brien’s critique of Pomeranz’s thesis. Pomeranz argued that the industrial revolution in England was a sort of sudden and unbalanced movement, more a rupture than a continuity and also insisted that small changes might be qualitatively relevant. He used the well-known metaphor of the butterfly effect to explain this (Pomeranz, 2000: 279-280). Furthermore, as has been already mentioned, Pomeranz insisted on the importance of the colonial bounty for avoiding a Malthusian trap that would have been a strong deterrent of the productive gains obtained through industrialization. O’Brien asserted that Pomeranz overemphasized the importance of colonial goods and raw materials coming from the Americas for the changes in productivity in Europe and that some sort of endogenous explanation of the industrial revolution is still necessary. Most important, for O’Brien, Pomeranz’s idea of the importance of small changes in provoking major transformations is a ‘postmodern’ cliché that “simply destroys any claims that economic history might have to precision” (O’Brien, 2006: 78).

O’Brien and Landes are not alone in tracking the intellectual foundations of the new global history in the already old postmodern tendencies. De Vries, mentioned above, sees in the emphasis on connections, entanglements, circulation, and the attempts at decentering our historical narrative a continuation of the postmodern attacks on metanarratives (De Vries, 2013: 41).

The legacies of the so-called postmodern approaches, such as the linguistic turn or postcolonial studies, and their influence on the new global turn are still something that needs to be explored. Nevertheless, for me and for other researchers what made the global turn attractive was precisely the opposite: a challenge to the postmodern critique of the possibilities of history writing and a restatement of some central questions and some ways of doing history. In other words, I am not concerned here with the validity of the new interpretations in these particular case studies but with the mood in which we receive them.

Bayly's emphasized connections and decentered narratives, by paying attention to local and individual experiences other than the usual Eurocentric ones. But he did not dismiss the possibility of explanation. The 'why' played a role in his book and the possibility of a grand narrative was not totally discarded.<sup>2</sup> Bin Wong and Pomeranz explored the possibilities of comparison against the challenge of some postmodern positions, which by focusing on meaning as the main goal of historical analysis reject the search for commonalities. Furthermore, the return to the *Annales* also implies the recovery of the tradition of the *longue durée*. I will return to this point later. Last but not least, these new proposals were interested in spatial inequality, which I have been always concerned about.

But there were obvious problems as well. The most important for us, historians of Latin America, seemed to be the marginal role of the region for many of historians who follow the global turn. Why? I believe there are several reasons and some of them are paradoxical. First, the demise of dependency theory. To some extent, some of the production of the new global history was dealing with the preoccupations of dependency theory or with the question of development. But a generation of Latin American economic historians, thanks to solid empirical research, had already challenged the premises of dependency theory. The defeat of dependency theory changed the research agenda. Many historians abandoned the study of the economy. Others followed the cliometric fashion, which created a huge gap in the profession. More recently, the global history turn has touched Latin American economic history, but through the discussion of the so-called first globalization, influenced by the work of Kevin O'Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson (1999).<sup>3</sup>

Second, the success of the Latin American states in terms of their duration and stability of their borders and the defeat of alternative territorial constructions since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century might also constitute a challenge to the diffusion of global history. A history that emphasizes connections across borders and the superfluity of the national framework for understanding some of the most significant historical questions found in Latin America: both stable borders and solid national historiographical traditions.

Last but not least, sometimes global history has served as a sort of replacement of Eurocentric history with Eurasian history. To a large extent this new agenda is concerned with the question of the 'rise' of Asia. As usual, our present circumstances loom large in the way we think about the past. (The concern with environmental history is another good example of this). As Aldo Marchesi remarked in his participation at the Rio Conference, the global turn began elsewhere and therefore Latin Americans' interests and preoccupations were not on the agenda. Marchesi then posed a pertinent question: should we, historians of Latin America, engage with the global turn and if so, in which ways?

Although we do not agree on what global history is – and we do not have to –, during the Rio Conference there was some common ground for discussion. Let me begin with the more obvious. We talked a lot about space (and much less about time, which I believe is revealing of the problems we are interested in). First, the discussion about Latin America in a global context is obviously a spatial discussion. Second, most historians accept the idea that global history is essentially about going beyond the national-space of the historiographical framework of the nation-state. Some of the participants in the Conference manifested their doubts about the possibility of neglecting the nation-state altogether. (In any case, this is a very modern concern. Historians working on earlier periods are not assailed by doubts about the pertinence of throwing out the national framework). Third, global historians dedicate long hours to the discussion about the spatial concepts and units we have to work with: the region, the local and the global, networks, connections, oceanic spaces, Latin America, the South, center, periphery, and so on. Last, in the field – and also at the Conference – constant references are made to the idea of 'de-centering' the perspective – which is a spatial idea – or to whether or not the concept of 'periphery' is valid because it offers an image of Latin America (or the South) as a victim of history, without agency.

And yet, I believe the discussion of space in this fashion is fraught with problems. Since we are not sure what global history is about, perhaps we can try to envision some role for the historian in public debates. What is our work (whether global or not) useful for? We know that professional history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was associated with the nation-building process. Perhaps, we should insist more on going beyond nationalist histories rather than national histories *per se*. I will delve into this a little later on. Moreover, if we care about spatial inequalities - and I think we must care - to what extent can we discard with the idea of center and periphery, or better, the idea of centers and peripheries? How to account for spatial asymmetry without these concepts or some ideas about hierarchical territorialization? Perhaps one of our goals should be to analyze how these hierarchies are formed and changed in history. We should think of power as a property of space. And here, obviously, history of empires is still

significant. Fortunately, the history of empires is quite alive and the discussion about empire was a significant one during the Rio Conference.<sup>4</sup> To discuss empires, to compare empires, and to connect empires does not imply celebrating the achievements of empire builders, but rather recognizing the importance of a system of political organization of a space. On the other hand, ideas about connections, convergences, and networks are truly suggestive. But on many occasions they celebrated a flat world, a world in which inequalities are strikingly absent. Moreover, many networks are not worthy of celebration. Slavery is a good example of this.

At the Rio Conference, Ángela Vergara was afraid that global history could mean an imposition from top to down. She insisted on recovering the experience of the local, in particular for the field of labor history.<sup>5</sup> But she introduced a concept, which I also want to use, the idea of 'translocal'. Because in the end, what is the meaning of local? Are we sure that in order to understand the way of experiencing life from the bottom up we have to limit ourselves to the surrounding physical space of the people? How is the culture of Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro workers shaped in spatial terms? Global or transnational historians have paid significant attention to cities and ports because they are truly hubs of ideas and people. Cities seem to be ideal scenarios for studying connections and networks. Sheldon Pollock has also used the term 'translocal' to refer to the idea of the impossibility of conceived culture as essential, permanent and authentic. There is no such thing as an authentic culture, as those labeled by Pollock as 'indigenist' seem to believe.<sup>6</sup> And this is something that we historians (whether global or not) must try to transmit. Paulo Drinot's remarks during the Rio Conference that global history should serve to denaturalize the concept of Western or Europe goes in that direction. We should move definitively beyond the orientalist paradigm and we should avoid to 'orientalize' our space of studies, no matter if we talk about Asia, Latin America or Europe. By doing that, we will contribute to erode nationalist historiographies.

During the Rio Conference Ángela Vergara said, in a very interesting statement, that, "we gain in the engagement with the global by keeping it local." I would say, by keeping it translocal. We do not have to accept the indigenist proposition as a response to the global threat. Indigenists defend that the authentic way of existing in life is locally rooted. But this is not and has never been a universal historical law. There are many ways of belonging to the world and there have been many ways of belonging to the world in the past.

But at the same time, by emphasizing the translocal we are responding to the globalist utopia that assumed as unavoidable an impossible process of universal convergence toward some allegedly superior model. Here intellectual history plays a major role. I would say that intellectual history is by definition global. Martín Bergel's contribution to the Rio Conference was quite important in this sense. Bergel shows how the ideas of the Peruvian Haya de la

Torre, the founder of APRA, were shaped in a dialogue (“The Chinese mirror”) with the Chinese nationalism of the Guomindang (Bergel, 2016 and 2015: 258 and ff). Therefore, even a phenomenon usually defined as the ultimate Latin American political trait, populism, was truly a translocal process.

As in the case of populism, the question of universalism(s) can only be addressed from the perspective of global intellectual history. And this would allow us to escape from the dichotomy between universal and relative values that many times seems to encapsulate and limit public debate. We, as historians, must remind our students and our small (or, if we are lucky, big) audience, that historically speaking competing universalisms but also entanglements between universalisms have always been the norm.

What about time? Is global history the history of a particular period? What are the main features of that period? Notwithstanding our professional bias as historians, in previous years we have devoted more attention to the question of space than to the issue of time in debates about global history. In fact, my own view about humanity entering a new global period is to some extent skeptical, which does not mean I am against periodization of any type. As mentioned above, my first readings in the field of global history caught my attention because of their interests in the *longue durée* (which does not necessarily mean only continuity). Again I believe this is about our role as historians. This is something that David Armitage and Jo Guldi have recently stated in their *Manifesto* (2014). We live in a period marked by short-time concerns. Historians have a sort of comparative advantage in the understanding of the long-term. We should take advantage of this. Obviously, long-term perspectives affect the spatial units or spatial relationships we are exploring and in this sense this is connected with the global turn again. Writing global history could mean also expanding the time period of our research. As Armitage and Guldi emphasize, calling for a focus on long-term processes is clearly a political statement.

Let us move to the issue of periodization. During the Rio Conference, Diego Olstein stated that global history is the history of the creation of a single global space since 1492, while Alexandre Moreli referred to the advent of a new era, an era of globalization or of global history since the 1970s or the 1980s. This was an era characterized by increased interdependence among human societies and the vanishing of distances: the world is flat, as Thomas Friedman put it (2005). Some authors have remarked on the existence of periods of globalization and creation (and destruction) of world systems even before 1492 (Abu-Lughod, 1991). As we have seen, many economic historians talk of a ‘first period of globalization’ in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to WWI. These different propositions did not fit easily into each other and demonstrate that that we are far from consensus on when the global period of the human history began.

Furthermore, I have some doubts (only a few) about the label of globalization or about the existence of a new global period. Ryan Crew's discussion during the Rio Conference of a Hispanic-Asian Pacific Space in the colonial period is a good example of how 'global' or 'cosmopolitan' spaces can collapse. As he says in his paper: "global interactions and processes of change that instead move like advancing tides: waves of global history advance, recede, and move sideways in riptides" (Crewe, 2016). This is a good corrective to some teleological assumptions behind the narrative of globalization. Let us think reconsider economic historians' idea of first period of globalization and a second period of de-globalization in the Atlantic space. Periods of intense spatial connections and sudden (or gradual) disconnections often occurred in the history of human societies.<sup>7</sup> Also, is it not possible to think of spaces of connection and disconnection even in our supposedly global times? We have to be open to the possibility of new repetitions and not assume an unavoidable outcome. Again, thinking about our civic responsibilities as (global?) historians we must transmit the idea of agency and alternatives.

But also I am concerned about the characteristics of the most recent period, which does not necessarily imply challenging the idea of a turning point in the 1970s and the 1980s. Returning to Ryan's paper, Manila was a surprising cosmopolitan global city in the Early Modern Period. Something similar might be said of Singapore before WWII, Salonica before WWI, or Istanbul until the 1950s (Bayly and Harper, 2007: 9-10; Mazower, 2004). It would be difficult to find similar places in our world in which we assume that space has been abolished. The label of globalization for a new historical period is problematic, and in fact, global history could help us to go against the common sense or the ideas of the media about what globalization is. A global history perspective might help us to reveal connections in the past that would be almost impossible to conceive in our times.

In our cities, middle classes believe they live in a cosmopolitan atmosphere because they eat sushi or listen to world music. Yet, these experiences of the global (and they are experiences of the global) are also consumption experiences that keep us apart from others. It is part of a history of the increasing new barriers which have been constructed worldwide since the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> There is a wall in Palestine; Donald Trump won the US elections and among his electoral promises was the project of building a wall in the border between Mexico and the US; there is a wall of security in the Mediterranean frontier to deter the arrival of refugees; and there are physical and metaphorical barriers in the downtowns of our cities, which produce segregation, separation and divergence. This is not a history that fits smoothly into the narrative of globalization but is a history that we, as (global) historians, must tell and historicize.

## NOTES

**1** The Global History Conference brought together the 2<sup>o</sup> Coloquio Internacional Latinoamérica y la Historia Global and the 2nd workshop Latin America in a Global Context. The event was hosted by the School of Social Sciences of Fundação Getulio Vargas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in October 18-21, and was jointly organized by Fundação Getulio Vargas, Red Latinoamericana de Historia Global, the University of Pittsburgh, Universität Bern, Labmundi/Universidade de São Paulo, and Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro.

**2** In fact, Bayly launched a scathing critique of postmodern ideas about meta-narratives: “post-modernist works usually conceal their own underlying ‘meta-narrative,’ which is political and moralizing in its origins and implications” (Bayly, 2003: 9).

**3** The papers of Andrea Lluich (2016) and Sandra Kuntz (2016) presented at the Rio Conference were two important contributions in this line.

**4** Proof of this is the influence of the world history written by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper (2010).

**5** See her fascinating transnational study of local labor movements (Vergara, 2016).

**6** As Pollock expressively asserted: “all culture is really transculture. Indigenism is to the history of culture what creationism is to the history of the cosmos” (Pollock, 2006: 533).

**7** See also the suggestive idea of Frederick Cooper of spatial connections as ‘lumpy,’ that is, points of dense social and power connections along with others where the connections are flimsy (Cooper, 2005: 91-92).

**8** A fascinating account of the Brexit referendum that emphasizes this issue of the building of new barriers can be found in Smith (2016).

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