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Geographies of World History Graduate Conference

University of Cambridge, September 2017

REVIEWED BY CHASE CALDWELL SMITH

Chase is a candidate for the M.St. in Global and Imperial History at the University of Oxford, where he holds a Clarendon Scholarship. He received his B.A. in History from the University of Cambridge. Chase studies processes of cultural encounter in the early modern Iberian empires, working at the intersection of the histories of race, gender, knowledge, and religion. His master's dissertation investigates texts and images produced by Manuel Godinho de Erédia, a Luso-Malay cartographer who worked in the Portuguese Estado da Índia in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries.

Conceptualised, developed, and executed by the conveners of the Cambridge World History Workshop (WHW), this conference on September 30th, 2017, set out to explore the possibilities of using geography in the writing of world history. James Wilson (University of Cambridge), one of the conference's conveners, highlighted the diversity of ways in which the presenters addressed this issue. Reflecting on the conference's journey from conceptualisation to completion, Wilson noted a disjuncture between the interpretation of geography put forward in the call for papers, and many of the interpretations ultimately offered by the speakers.

The conveners had asked for papers examining "geographical features, including oceans, islands, rivers, mountains and cities," which they claimed "are increasingly being used as productive lenses for analysing connections and disconnections across and within empires and states." For further examples, they pointed to recent scholarly interest in "geographical intersections, such as those between sea and land, coast and interior, and lowland and highland." In other words, the conference's original conceptualisation of geography laid emphasis on using tangible features in the landscape as "productive lenses" through which one could write history.

However, as Wilson indicated, only some of the papers used geography in the sense of a physical or built feature of the landscape, with many framing geography differently. Thus, at the heart of this conference was a debate over the multiple meanings of geography and a reflection on the opportunities and tensions of using these plural geographies in the writing of world history. A geographical focus, the conference suggested, may be one of the ways in which historians can break out of the confines of national and regional historiographies, forge new connections, and adopt cross-regional, transnational, or international approaches—some of the key aims of world history and global history. This review will focus on three ways in which the papers used plural approaches to geography to make such historical

interventions, and then offer a personal reflection on the conference experience itself.

First, a focus on physical or built features in the landscape enabled some speakers to move beyond the historical unit of the nation state. For instance, two speakers on one panel analysed international efforts to control and demarcate bodies of water. Shereen Sherif (Jawaharlal Nehru University) studied the consequences of border-making in the strait between Sri Lanka and India in the twentieth-century. By placing a maritime border at the heart of her analysis, she took a transnational approach that cut across this national boundary. From a related perspective, Annalise Higgins (University of Cambridge) examined international tensions over the Panama Canal in the twentieth century—tensions which arose because of the canal's ambiguous legal status as either (or perhaps both) man-made or natural. This geographic ambiguity complicated arguments for restricting or permitting the passage of ships from certain nations during wartime. These papers also invited comparisons with other borders and canals around the world, meaning that both papers were implicitly, if not always explicitly, comparative on a global scale.

Second, another paper departed from a primary focus on physical features in the landscape to investigate mental, imaginative geographies. Jonathan Dixon (University of Cambridge) examined visual and symbolic geographies on medieval and early modern European maps. By approaching geography from a mental, rather than physical perspective, Dixon showed how cartographers imagined and represented distant and little-understood lands for European audiences. In effect, Dixon's paper highlighted one way in which cartographic sources can be used to write world history, underscoring that trans-regional connections between ideas and places can occur on the surface of maps as well as in the tangible world.

Third, one paper not only concentrated on built or imagined landscapes but also used the tools of present-day historical geography in its analysis of these landscapes. Lance Pursey (University of Birmingham), whose paper examined the Liao polity of northeastern Asia, displayed a map of Liao places which he had constructed using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). He reflected on this tool's opportunities—notably the visualisation of spatial data—but also commented on its limits and the importance of his other source materials. In doing so, Pursey suggested one way in which historians might use the tools of academic geography to visualise previously unnoticed connections between places in the landscape, and thereby write history in innovative ways.

In sum, many of the papers stretched their conceptualisations of geography to approach it in a variety of ways—for instance, as a maritime legal reality, as a cartographic representation of distant lands, and as a discipline whose tools can be used to enhance the writing of history. This diversity was matched by the breadth of periods and regions studied—ranging from sixteenth-century Mexico to the twentieth-century Philippines—suggesting the relevance of geography to

the writing of history across many times and locations. By taking a thematic approach, the conference brought together scholars focusing on different historical fields and engaged them in a productive and wide-ranging conversation that was not restricted to any specific period or region. In this vein, an end-of-day roundtable discussion enabled both the speakers and conveners to reflect on wider themes and questions raised throughout the conference. This brought all the papers together, encouraging the participants to think about them jointly, rather than in isolation.

This was a conference designed for graduate students by graduate students, with the ten presenters ranging from master's level through Ph.D. candidacy. It was also encouraging to see undergraduates in the audience, meaning that participation was still open to younger students. The conference's small scale enabled an intimacy that would have been harder to find at a larger event. The atmosphere was convivial, and critiques and questions were delivered in a friendly and constructive way. The conference therefore operated as a kind of workshop, in which students felt free to gather feedback on work in progress. From a social perspective, frequent coffee-breaks, a generous lunch, and post-conference drinks provided abundant opportunities for networking and further discussion. As a first-time conference presenter, this conviviality, both scholarly and social, was very welcoming.

While the conference was superbly executed, my main critique would be the absence of a pre-conference circulation of papers. It may have been helpful to read through some of the other presenters' papers beforehand, and feasible to do so as there were only ten. However, this is a minor concern, as the discussions on the day were in the end rich and thought-provoking.

This conference was but one of many opportunities offered to graduate students by the Cambridge World History Workshop (WHW). As Chris Wilson (University of Cambridge), one of the current conveners, informed me, the WHW runs weekly sessions for graduate students to share and discuss their work. Their past events include a roundtable discussion on conducting research in overseas archives and a reading group on "Race, Gender, and Class in World History." Upcoming events include a discussion on global intellectual history and a graduate conference on the theme "Texts in Motion: Materiality, Mobility, and Archiving in World History." While many of these events are designed for Cambridge students, the WHW's conferences are open to students from around the world. "Geographies of World History" drew many of its participants from UK universities, but it also brought together students from as far afield as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Princeton University, and the University of Lisbon. In addition to providing these students with the opportunity to present in front of their peers, the conference enabled the Cambridge conveners themselves to develop skills related to conference organisation, including the seeking of funding, the selection of papers, and the chairing

of panels. Thus, the conference was an important early career experience for the conveners as well as for the participants.

While this may have been a small, one-day conference, it engaged with important issues, and perhaps raised more questions about the relationship between geography and world history than it answered. However, if anything can be concluded about geography and world history from attending this conference, it is that the relationship between them is productive, plural, and deserving of further exploration.