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The Final Discussion of the First Global History Student Conference, 2015

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Final Discussion

The 2015 Global History Student Conference closed with a final discussion which reflected on the nature of the conference and the themes which had been discussed. This featured all of the participants, and other interested parties, who were divided into groups and asked to respond to three questions, which were chiefly aimed towards measuring the types of conversations that had developed over the course of the previous two days. The additional aim of this exercise was to draw attention to the synchronicities which had begun to appear between these discussions across the field of Global History.

1. After attending the conference what is your understanding of Global History? Is there anything in particular which you remember or agree/disagree with?

This question aroused one group to challenge the concept of Global History and specifically the persistent vagueness of the term ‘global’, and its implications. This necessitated the question: does Global History still imply a history of the whole world? As well as an integration and inevitable homogenisation of all spatial categories? These conclusions were however not satisfactory for this group, and they proposed that Global History holds the possibility of exploring new spatial relationship between multiple locations, thus allowing for new realities to emerge.

This question also provoked much discussion between groups as to the boundaries between definitions of Global and Transnational History. This led to the implication that Global History itself cannot be separated from eurocentrism and is often closely linked to ideas of empire and nation-states. These conclusions were however challenged by another group who asserted that Global History is not necessarily an all-encompassing term, but a methodological approach, which draws upon comparative and postcolonial approaches.

Several other groups emphasised the significance of researching the connections between different locations as a key signifier of Global History’s importance. They explored this in relation to socio-cultural, political and geographic borders; which at times, inhibit, and at others, promote the diffusion of various actors, and actor related resources. This, in turn, provoked the interesting point that Global History allows for a reimagining of histories through the stress it places upon the issue of connectivity, or the lack thereof, between spaces.

2. Could you tell us more about the relevance and position of Global History at your home institution?

This question provoked much academic and national factionalism amongst the groups, and led to an interesting regionalist understanding of how Global History is both researched and taught in different locations. Several participants from

British institutions stressed their preference for the term World History and noted that universities such as Cambridge and Liverpool did not have a Global History department. These comments provoked the reflection that there is a tendency amongst British historians to teach and research global themes in relation to the phenomenon of empire, prompting some even to comment that they felt this was Imperial History by the back door. Furthermore it was noted that whilst many British historians may be conducting research into global themes, they were not necessarily identifying with the label of Global History.

Participants from India highlighted how amongst Indian scholarship there is skepticism towards Global History due to suspicion that it acts, or can act, as a masking term for Colonial History. In these regards they mentioned Global History's strong tendency towards drawing on Colonial Studies, particularly in regards to methodologies. As a result there are few, if any, Global History classes, which means that students come to the field from a variety of interdisciplinary historical backgrounds and frequently see Global History as an umbrella term.

An Israeli participant noted that there are three departments currently in Israel. However research and teaching of Global History themes is hampered by national consciousness that prevents scholarship from looking far beyond national boundaries towards other global entanglements. The freedom to transgress these borders can thus be seen as privilege which is not shared by all historians in all locations, and indeed some are profoundly limited by institutions in terms of teaching and research.

Several participants from France noted how at their home universities a strong focus was placed upon understanding how Europe is connected to other geographic areas, which draws heavily from Transregional Studies. However, other French historians noted that Area Studies was still a highly present feature of French universities and functioned as the preferred term instead Global History.

German participants from Berlin and Heidelberg formed a clear coalition in their shared view of Global History as a methodological approach, which drew upon aspects of Transregional and Colonial History, but also emphasised the importance of Critical Theory as a defining feature of Global Histories. Furthermore the term itself appeared to be widely accepted by participants from German institutions, despite ambiguities and differing focusses.

3. What problems and strengths are there with a Global History approach?

The ambiguity of Global History was a central feature of this discussion with various groups expressing this issue as highly problematic, and noting the lack of clearly defined boundaries as a limiting factor for the field which promotes confusion amongst scholarship. Conversely this ambiguity was championed by other groups and individuals who felt that the ambiguities of global history promoted opportunities for young scholars to define the field. Furthermore they argued that

the ambiguity of Global History can be used to liberate historians and histories alike, from already established historical fields.

A number of groups also commented on the attractiveness of Global History as a marketable quality, which is being used to attract scholars from numerous related fields into new research and teaching constellations. While this leads some to see Global History as catch-all term, others were drawn to the possibilities for both new and interdisciplinary approaches, as well as for the creation of sub-fields which promote specialist interests. In this regard many groups also referenced the emerging discussions which had developed throughout the conference itself as evidence of these new possibilities.

Closing Note

The content of these discussions highlights that there are still plenty of, as of yet, unresolved debates pertaining to the nature of Global History, and that scholars must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of previous historical schools. Alongside this however, it is abundantly clear that there is also enormous potential for students to make a significant impact upon this field in order to shape its course and contours. These themes will continue to form the basis for many discussions yet to come in the field of Global History and we hope to discuss these issues, along with other related topics, in our 2016 conference, with hopefully the same amount of energy, thoughtfulness, and dynamism which made this year such a success. Through this second venture we hope to expand these discussions into other fields, in the expectation that an interdisciplinary approach will provide important alternative views and external critiques of Global History, which we as scholars need to consider and respond to in order to develop.