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What is Global History?

By Sebastian Conrad, Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2016. Pp. 312, Hardcover, £22.95, ISBN: 9780691155258

REVIEWED BY DARIA TASHKINOVA

Daria Tashkinova completed her undergraduate degree in Area Studies at Ural Federal University (Russia) in 2014, focusing on history and politics of Eastern and Central Europe. The same year she started an MA in Global History at both Free University and Humboldt University of Berlin. Her research interests include economic, social and gender history of the late Soviet Union; transnational labour migrations; history of imperialism; gender and education history.

If you type the word ‘global’ into the world’s largest search engine Google, approximately 1.6 billion results will appear on the screen. The last twenty to twenty-five years, following the rise of globalization, has seen a period in which the term “global” has become a trend that has influenced almost every sphere of human life.

In a world where global has become the synonym of all that is modern and up-to-date, this trend has not left history and academia out of its influence. Histories with a ‘global’ prefix have been appearing in academia since the late 1990s: global intellectual history, global urban history, global history of ideas, etc. While some scholars are enjoying the obvious bloom of these new approaches, others might still be wandering in the darkness of uncertainty regarding what the core ambition of global history actually is. Historical methodology has already seen the rise of world history, transnational history, and international history. Is “global” just a new way to address the same issues using a new terminology? Should global history be considered just another response to the challenges of globalization and an attempt by historians to stay relevant in a fast-changing world?

In his new book “*What is Global History?*” Sebastian Conrad, one of the leading historians in the field and a professor of Global History at Free University of Berlin, confronts the existing narratives of global history and pursues the creation of a systematized guidebook to global history. Conrad is not the first historian to work on methodology and approaches to global history. Most notable of previous efforts is an edited volume titled “*Writing the History of the Global*”, in which leading historians in the field, including John Darwin and Kenneth Pomeranz, were re-thinking approaches to history in an increasingly global world. Their obvious response was to embrace global history as the new approach. However, Conrad appears to be less certain, and while advocating for global history he does not ignore its challenges and limitations. His study, being one of the most recent and productive, consolidates the previously sporadic research on the various problems and apprehensions of this new way to write history.

Conrad clarifies the long-existing differences between global history, globalization and big history, drawing a dividing line between them and creating a special place for global history in the spectrum of various histories. Although he treats global history as an approach in its own right, he nevertheless discusses the previously existing approaches to doing what is now called global history. In Conrad's perspective comparative history, transnational history, postcolonial studies, multiple modernities and world-systems theory have all influenced global historians and can potentially be used for writing a coherent global narrative. The first several chapters of the book are brilliantly structured and are perfectly suited for clarifying the existing approaches. The reader leaves the first five chapters having almost no questions left to ask, and even if they appear, the answers could be easily found in the following chapters that deal with specific categories of time, space and positionality in global history.

Arguably, the best chapter of the book is "*Global history for whom? The politics of Global History*". Conrad goes beyond history as an academic field and stretches out his argument into the questions of the interdependence of politics and society and history (both global and non-global). He follows the question once stated by Lynn Hunt: "...history is in its crisis and not just of university budgets. The nagging question that has proved so hard to answer is, 'What is it good for?'"¹ Conrad argues that global history represents not a methodological alternative but a way in which historians can examine the world and therefore become citizens of the world themselves. Historians, accountable to the public today, should thus become the advocates for integration and cooperation in the world, while not debunking the concept of nation-states completely. Conrad therefore tries to create a place for historians in modern society, and global history is perhaps the best tool to use in order for history to rethink itself.

With his usual grace and coherency, Conrad emphasizes the linguistic and geopolitical concerns that many historians have with global history. The difficulties inherent in the concept of Eurocentrism, or to put it more specifically, "westcentrism", shine brighter in the last chapter, as Conrad pushes beyond only addressing this as a historical narrative and cliché (like he did in the earlier chapters). Here he mostly focuses on the questions of eurocentrism and westcentrism in historical studies and academic circles. Including a subchapter on English as the lingua-franca for the academia, and the concerns about the Anglo-Saxon world as being the pioneers of global history and thus leaving no place for the development of global histories in Asia, Latin America or Africa, Conrad once again discusses these questions, without avoiding them completely (as other historians have done). Therefore, his book does not suppress the discussions and concerns of a wider public, but discusses ways in which to address these issues. In this lies one of the most valuable benefits of the book. In a calm and very well-balanced

¹ Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York [u.a.]: Norton, 2014), 1.

argumentative narrative Conrad is not afraid to face the questions and accusations that have been brought to the table by various historians involved in the field. He not only gives his answers to the existing criticisms and concerns but also poses further challenges for new generations of global historians. For example, in the last part of chapter ten, he emphasizes four challenges caused by limitation of the «global» as a concept (p. 224-230), therefore pointing to the future global history and proposing ways in which historians can write themselves into new narratives.

As Conrad argues throughout his book, global history is not a universal remedy from all the problems in historical research. However, it can potentially give incredible insights into the world of previously unknown interactions and entanglements. Conrad presents a wonderfully structured and researched narrative of global history, mapping out the potential problems and presenting his own solutions. The conclusions and chapters written make this study a well-suited guidebook for newcomers, as well as offering fresh perspectives and suggestions for the scholars already active in the field. Moreover, Conrad has successfully written an informative book, which will be a great inspiration for many more generations of historians to come. Even if we remain uncertain about the future of global history as a legitimate field, in this text Conrad manages to get out of the box and speak for historians as academics, giving new suggestions on how to deal with long-standing problems. “*What is Global History?*” shows that there is light at the end of the tunnel for historians who seem to believe that “the End of History” is approaching.