

Globalizations, Global Histories and Historical Globalities

Contemporary concerns about globalization are rather difficult to avoid. Growing interdependence enriches some people and marginalizes others. Some professional observers counsel that these economic changes are inevitable, while others mobilize in protest and opposition to unregulated and often rapid change. There are clear gains in community sensitivities. Genocide in Rwanda or a destructive tsunami in the Indian Ocean are events that are no longer “too distant” to heed. Selected poorer areas gain new jobs while other areas lose employment to places with lower wage structures. There are also clear losses in terms of such activities as globalized crime and pollution, as well as the more rapid dissemination of disease.

History is a matter of perspective. Local perspectives yield local histories. Global perspectives yield global histories. One of the advantages of a global perspective is that phenomena that were once thought to be particularistic and disconnected turn out to be anything but purely local affairs. Rather, they are, at least in part, a product of people and regions being enmeshed in larger networks. “Things” do occur locally but not necessarily solely as a result of local influences. Local-global interactions and influences are reciprocal, at least potentially.

How should we go about developing global history(-ies)? What and where should we emphasize? Are there recurring processes that permit generalization? Or is everything that has happened unlike anything that has happened?

There are various approaches to developing global history and explaining globalization processes. We will certainly not be the last word on the subject. By bringing together different points of view, we can hope to influence and accelerate the analytical probes toward developing more global perspectives on human interactions in the past, present and future.

To some, globalization and global history cannot and should not be conflated, in the sense that some want to argue that all of global history is in fact part of the same processes that we may call “globalization.” Therefore, the latest stage of globalization is in fact just that deep antecedents in all of global history culminate in the present expressions of globalization.

Others reject this view entirely and argue that we would have no need for a new concept such as globalization at all as it would serve no useful purpose—because all global history is globalization and vice versa. Globalization is therefore to be defined as a qualitatively distinctive set of phenomena. Therefore, it requires new concepts and theories to explain. Globalization is not global history.

The third position, naturally, seeks to find some middle ground or reconciliation between these two opposing views on the relationship between globalization and global history. It is not necessary to argue that there is a strict separation between the two analytically and historically; but rather that they inform one another theoretically and empirically. In this sense, the search for patterns or patterned processes in global history is part of the intellectual preparation for a theory of globalization as a set of processes not necessarily entirely without precedent. That is to say, we

have seen instances of “globalizing” patterns in the past, and the study of these can at least cast further light upon processes in the present to which they can be legitimately compared as being similar in some aspects.

Of course, all three of these positions still beg the question of definition. For some, “global history” encompasses all human history going back to the year dot. For others, however, the only true “global history” is very much a product of modern forces of change and cannot be projected all the way back to the very beginning. Some argue that “global history” is therefore only very recent history—some even maintaining that it is not more than a couple of decades old. As a concept, it is accompanied by other concepts such as “network society,” “information society,” “post-industrial age,” “post-modern age” and so on.

There is also finally an even larger controversy that remains in all above discussion. With what intentions do we try to link “globalization” and “global history” closely together?

One take on this argument is that we simply seek to establish positive knowledge about the “real” processes, structures and outcomes of these processes and identify the “real” nature of their historical and contemporary relationship. In effect, this is a kind of mapping exercise on which a cumulative body of knowledge can be established. In this sense, “objective” or “positive” knowledge about the past is valuable in itself, as it is the foundation for an objective global history and thus of a comprehension of contemporary globalization as well. An alternative view would be to assert that the debate is not really about the past but actually about the future. It is about the future of a “global future” and the future of an humanity, instead of any national, ethnic, religious, cultural or political fragment of it. The more we understand the past, therefore, the more it may inform the present and the future.

Our view on this is ecumenical and tolerant. This is one of the beginnings of what will be a long conversation, not the end of one. The debate about the relationship between globalization and global history, which is actually about our self-understanding of the past, the present and the future of humanity, is pivotal. We believe that it will remain so for quite some time to come. The outcome of these debates and discussions is by no means predetermined or clear from the standpoint of where we are today. It is hoped that these understandings will in fact have some bearing not only on how we reinterpret the relevance of the past to the present, but how we understand and shape our common human future.