What is global history now?

Historians cheered globalism with work about cosmopolitans and border-crossing, but the power of place never went away

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Well, that was a short ride. Not long ago, one of the world’s leading historians, Lynn Hunt, stated with confidence in *Writing History in the Global Era* (2014) that a more global approach to the past would do for our age what national history did in the heyday of nation-building: it would, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau had said was necessary of the nation-builders, remake people from the inside out. Global history would produce tolerant and cosmopolitan global citizens. It rendered the past a mirror on our future border-crossing selves — not unlike Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan father and white American mother, raised in Indonesia and educated in the Ivy
League, who became the passing figure of our fading dreams of meritocracy without walls.

The mild-mannered German historian Jürgen Osterhammel might serve as an example of that global turn. When his book *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the 19th Century* (2014) came out in English, one reviewer baptised him the new Fernand Braudel. It was already a sensation in Germany. One day, Osterhammel’s office phone at the University of Konstanz rang. On the other end of the line was the country’s chancellor, Angela Merkel. ‘You don’t check your SMSs,’ she scolded lightly. At the time, Merkel was on the mend from a broken pelvis and the political fallout of the Eurocrisis. While recovering, she’d read Osterhammel’s 1,200-page book for therapy. She was calling to invite the author to her 60th-birthday party to lecture her guests about time and global perspectives.Obsessed with the rise of China and the consequences of digitalisation, she had turned to the sage of the moment: the global historian.

It’s hard to imagine Osterhammel getting invited to the party now. In our fevered present of Nation-X First, of resurgent ethno-nationalism, what’s the point of recovering global pasts? Merkel, daughter of the East, might be the improbable last voice of Atlantic Charter internationalism. Two years after her 60th birthday, the vision of an integrated future and spreading tolerance is beating a hasty retreat.

What is to become of this approach to the past, one that a short time ago promised to re-image a vintage discipline? What would global narratives look like in the age of an anti-global backlash? Does the rise of ‘America First’, ‘China First’, ‘India First’ and ‘Russia First’ mean that the dreams and work of globe-narrating historians were just a bender, a neo-liberal joyride?

Until very recently, the practice of modern history centred on, and was dominated by, the nation state. Most history was the history of the nation. If you wander through the history and biography aisles of either brick-and-mortar or virtual bookstores, the characters and heroes of patriotism dominate. In the United States, authors such as Walter Isaacson, David McCullough and Doris Kearns Goodwin have helped to give millions of readers their understanding of the past and the present. Inevitably, they wrote page-turning profiles of heroic nation-builders. Every nation cherishes its national history, and every country has a cadre of flame-keepers.

Then, along came globalisation and the shake-up of old, bordered imaginations. Historians quickly responded to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the crumbling protective ramparts of national capitalism, the boom in container shipping, and the rise of the cosmopolis. New scales and new concepts came to life. Europe’s Schengen Agreement, inked in 1985, the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993, and the founding of the World Trade Organization in 1995, heralded new levels of international fusion. These now-imperilled treaties promised a borderless world. ‘The world is being flattened,’ Thomas Friedman’s popular manifesto of globalisation, *The
World Is Flat (2005), concluded. ‘I didn’t start it and you can’t stop it,’ Friedman wrote in an open letter to his daughter, ‘except at great cost to human development and your own future.’

As the only game in town, globalisation produced a new popular genre that might be called patriotic globalism. Samantha Power’s A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide (2002), Philip Gourevitch’s We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families (1998), and books by Adam Hochschild all gave us horrible crises with would-be heroes fashioned, not as nation-builders, but as humanitarian worldmakers. There was also a surge of stories about a shared, planetary future, with a common, carbon-addicted past. The Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992 turned sustainability into a border-busting buzzword and fuelled environmental history. Two decades earlier, Alfred Crosby could not find a publisher who wanted his book The Columbian Exchange (1972), which charted the ecological fallout of the integration of the New World biome into the Eurasian system. Now, his book is Biblical.

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In 2006, the scholars jumped officially on board. A team founded the Journal of Global History. Patrick O’Brien at the London School of Economics kicked it off with a call for new cosmopolitan meta-narratives <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/26471/1/__libfile_REPOSITORY_Content_O%27Brien,%20P_Historical%20traditions%20and%20modern%20imperatives%20for%20the%20restoration%20of%20global%20history_Historical%20traditions%20and%20modern%20imperatives%20for%20the%20restoration%20of%20global%20history%20(LSE%20RO).pdf> for ‘our globalising world’. It was dedicated to stories to transcend (quoting the 18th-century Tory philosopher Lord Bolingbroke) ‘national partialities and prejudices’. Behind the scenes, universities in Europe (which includes, for a few more months at least, the United Kingdom), pockets in Japan, China and Brazil, but most especially in the US, rolled out new courses, new research centres, and new PhD programmes.

After years of falling enrolments, declining majors and a dispiriting job market for history PhDs, many saw ‘global history’ as an elixir, a way to return to public relevance. Globalisation had become all the rage. Historians, Hunt wrote in 2014, were stepping up with narratives of interconnection and integration. Jared Diamond’s works, synthesising 13,000 years of global history, populated airport newsstands. To get middle- and high-school students jazzed up about history on a cosmological scale — ‘13.8 Billion Years of History. Free. Online. Awesome’ — Bill Gates unveiled his Big History Project. More recently, Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton: A Global History (2014) swept prizes and hit No 1 on Amazon’s bestseller ranks under the ‘Fashion and Textile’ category.
To understand what global history was, it helps to understand what it was supposed to eclipse. It used to be that, in the US, history departments had their cores in American and/or European fields; in Canada, Australia and Britain, the nuclei were also national. History meant the history of the nation, its peoples and their origins. When social and cultural history came along, it changed the subject from presidents or prime ministers to Hollywood or garment workers. But the framework remained mostly national; historians still wrote books about the making of the English working class, or the conversion of peasants into French citizens. There might be a smattering of East Asian or Latin American historians in the mix. Often, they were cordoned into regional studies units, or lumped – as in my home department at Princeton – as ‘non-Western historians’, defined by their fundamental difference, there to embellish but not challenge the national canon. The major exception was the study of migrations and diasporas, coerced or free. But even those fields tended to sit alongside the national behemoths; there was the American history survey (or French, or British), and then the story of African-Americans.

True, there has long been something called ‘world history’. The standard world history course was a tour of the civilisations that preceded or abutted ‘Western Civilisation’. The Western Civ industry dated to the early years of the 20th century. Back then, faced with creeping specialisation, historians got summoned to offer a structured base for the national collegian-citizen. With household names such as Arnold Toynbee and Will and Ariel Durant it boomed, like the rest of American industry, in the golden age of NATO, Sputnik and federal spending. One of its greatest figures was the University of Chicago historian William H McNeill, author of the stand-by History of Western Civilisation: A Handbook (1949). As Western Civ became something of a relic in the 1960s, ‘world history’ or ‘world civilisations’ took its place to explain the Triumph of the West and, by extension, the Decline of the Rest. McNeill’s epic The Rise of the West (1963) was the high-standard bearer for this kind of encompassing view of the planetary past composed of civilisational blocs competing for global supremacy. This was not global history, though many subsequent global historians cut their teeth studying other civilisations. Rather, it was a story that brought in the Rest to help explain the West.

Connection was in; networks were hot: global history would show the latticework of exchanges and encounters

By the 1980s, it was no longer foregone that the Rest was synonymous with decline, or the West with rise. The Rest, to some, became the new threat to define the purpose of the West. Samuel Huntington’s The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World
Order (1996) offered a counterpoint to the emerging bravura of one-world heroism. In Huntington’s view, the essentially dark, antagonistic, competitive perspective of the world-civilisations approach remained the driving force of history. Don’t kid yourself, he argued: the fall of the Berlin Wall merely heralded the return of an older, deeper civilisational conflict. That message has new treads with the White House chief strategist Steve Bannon’s prophecies about the inevitable collision of the ‘Judeo-Christian West’ with the Jihadist East. ‘There is a major war brewing, a war that’s already global,’ he told an audience in 2014. ‘Every day that we refuse to look at this as what it is, and the scale of it, and really the viciousness of it, will be a day where you will rue that we didn’t act.’

The notion of intractable divides, however, seemed increasingly at odds with the high-def, global-fusing present; it mobilised a new generation of historians to go beyond stories of our walled-off, essential selves. Their global history project would reveal connections across societies instead of cohesions within them. The vintage comparative, civilisational framework gave way to contacts and linkages. Connection was in; networks were hot. Global history would show the latticework of exchanges and encounters – from the Silk Road of 1300 to turbo-charged supply chains of 2000.

More than anyone, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, now at the University of California, Los Angeles, made the coinage of ‘connected histories’ his own. As determined to dethrone the myth of Indian civilisation (whose Hindutva ideology is dear to the tribalism of India’s Right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party) as he is to dispel the idea of a Great European Trajectory (from Athens to the Enlightenment, a march dear to European tribalists), the son of urbane Delhi turned encounters and contacts with many origin points and as many meanings into a global bricolage that antedated our multicultural makeups. Through travel, discovery, translation and the flow of books, silver and opium – ‘histories that moved’ as Subrahmanyam called them in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 2013 – he evoked a world laced together long before the rise of the West.

Global history’s other signature was its emphasis on dependence between societies. If globalisation opened the borders between Westerners and Resterners, global historians were especially interested not just in the contacts, but in the ways in which countries and regions contoured each other. The rise of the West looked more and more not just like a response to the Rest, but dependent on it. Even the industrial revolution and Europe’s great leap forward in the 19th century, the one thing that seemed to separate Europe from others, came under the global historian’s macroscope. In The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy (2000), Kenneth Pomeranz demolished the view of Europeans as the authors of their own miraculous rise. He revealed how much European enterprise and accumulation shared with China. How Europe’s break from the common, Eurasian-Malthusian straightjacket began not with the region’s internal uniqueness, but with access to and conquest of what Adam Smith called the wastelands of the Americas. In
the same vein, global historians demonstrated how much insurance, banking and shipping startups owed to the African slave trade. The European miracle was, in short, a global harvest.

Global history did not mean telling the story of everything in the world. What was global was not the object of study, but the emphasis on connections, scale and, most of all, integration. Even the nations and civilisations were more the products and less the producers of global interactions. Some scholars went all-out. ‘If you are not doing an explicitly transnational, international or global project, you now have to explain why you are not,’ said the Harvard historian David Armitage in 2012. ‘The hegemony of national historiography,’ he pronounced, ‘is over.’

No sooner did historians catch the globalisation wave with fancy new courses, magazines, textbooks and attention, than the wave seemed to collapse. The story changed. A powerful political movement arose against ‘globalism’. White-supremacists and Vladimir Putin fans from the Traditionalist Worker Party in the US proclaim as their slogan that ‘Globalism is the poison, nationalism is the antidote.’ Donald Trump put it only a bit more mildly. ‘Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo,’ he thundered to cheering Republicans in his convention speech in July 2016. On the day after the US inaugurated Trump, the French presidential hopeful Marine Le Pen gave an incendiary speech at a summit in Germany, calling 2017 the year of the great awakening of the nationalist Right. ‘We are living through the end of one world,’ she proclaimed, ‘and the birth of another.’

Suddenly, global historians seemed out of step with their times. If the backlash was a wake-up call for the globalisers, it also revealed some problems for the global chroniclers.

All narratives are selective, shaped as much by what they exclude as what they include. Despite the mantras of integration and the inclusion on the planetary scale, global history came with its own segregation — starting with language. Historians working across borders merged their mode of communication in ways that created new walls; in the search for academic cohesion, English became Globish. Global history would not be possible without the globalisation of the English language. In a recent workshop in Tokyo, I marvelled as Italians, Chinese and Japanese historians swapped ideas and sake in a lingua franca. But this kind of flatness can mask a new linguistic hierarchy. It is one of the paradoxes of global history that the drive to overcome Eurocentrism contributed to the Anglicising of intellectual lives around the world. As English became Globish, there was less incentive to learn foreign languages — the indispensable key to bridging ourselves and others. According to a 2015 report by the Modern Languages Association, the US foreign-language head count at universities peaked in 2009, and has been declining ever since.
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The retreat from learning how to talk with others reflected a wider stall. Despite the embrace of global history, there is evidence that the global turn didn’t actually help to raise the profile of the Rest. In a 2013 survey <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2013/its-a-small-world-after-all> of 57 history departments in the UK, the US and Canada, Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt show that historians remain pretty loyal to the West after all. In the UK, 13 per cent of historians study the non-Western world. The most wincing datum? East Asia commands only 1.9 per cent of all history faculty appointments in the UK. In the US, the figure is almost 9 per cent. Even in the US, less than one-third of historians are interested in the world beyond the West. If some critics were getting all worked up about the encroachment of Resterners on the Western Civ canon, they needn’t worry. ’We’re overwhelmingly interested in ourselves,’ Clossey and Guyatt conclude. To justify Brexit, the UK’s prime minister Theresa May yearns for a ‘Global Britain’ (as if Europe were not part of the globe), but UK historians still look inwards; 41 per cent of historians in the UK study Britain and Ireland, homelands to 1 per cent of the world’s population. Oxford University, my alma mater, recently mothballed its professorship in Latin American history, the last of its kind in the UK. Outside the Anglosphere, things are mostly worse. In all the German-speaking universities, there are only five professors of African history. In Japan, to study non-Japanese and non-‘Oriental’ pasts means dispatch from history departments altogether, to teach about the Other in other units on the margins of the master-discipline.

What are we to make of all this? First, the high hopes for cosmopolitan narratives about ‘encounters’ between Westerners and Resterners led to some pretty one-way exchanges about the shape of the global. It is hard not to conclude that global history is another Anglospheric invention to integrate the Other into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms, in our tongues. Sort of like the wider world economy.

Secondly, to some extent, global history sounds like history fit for the now-defunct Clinton Global Initiative, a shiny, high-profile endeavour emphasising borderless, do-good storytelling about our cosmopolitan commonness, global history to give globalisation a human face. It privileged motion over place, histoires qui bougent (stories that move) over tales of those who got left behind, narratives about others for the selves who felt some connection – of shared self-interest or empathy – between far-flung neighbours of the global cosmopolis.

Perhaps we should not be shocked at the backlash against post-national, cosmopolitan story-telling. During the French regional elections of 2015, one Front
National poster featured two women’s faces, one painted with the French tricolour and the other wearing a burqa. The text proclaimed: ‘Choose your neighborhood: vote for the Front.’ The logic of global history tended to dwell on integration and concord, rather than disintegration and discord. Global historians favoured stories about curiosity towards distant neighbours. They – we – tended to overlook nearby neighbourhoods dissolved by transnational supply chains.

Global history preferred a scale that reflected its cosmopolitan self-yearnings. It also implicitly created what the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016) called ‘empathy walls’ between globe-trotting liberals and locally rooted provincials. Going global often meant losing contact with – to borrow another of her *bons mots* – ‘deep stories’ of resentment about loss of and threat to local attachments. The older patriotic narratives had tethered people to a sense of bounded unity. The new, cosmopolitan, global narratives crossed those boundaries. But they dissolved the heartlanders’ ties to a sense of place in the world. In a political climate dominated by railing against Leviathan government, big banks, mega-treaties with inscrutable acronyms such as TPP, and distant Eurocrats, the pretentious drive to replace deep stories of near-mourning with global stories of distant connection was bound to face its limits. In the scramble to make Others part of our stories, we inadvertently created a new swath of strangers at home.

Global history faces two seemingly opposite challenges for an inter-dependent, over-heating planet. If we are going to muster meaningful narratives about the togetherness of strangers near and far, we are going to have to be more global and get more serious about engaging other languages and other ways of telling history. Historians and their reader-citizens are also going to have to re-signify the place of local attachments and meanings. Going deeper into the stories of Others afar and Strangers at home means dispensing with the idea that global integration was like an electric circuit, bringing light to the connected. Becoming inter-dependent is not just messier than drawing a wiring diagram. It means reckoning with dimensions of networks and circuits that global historians – and possibly all narratives of cosmopolitan convergence – leave out of the story: lighting up corners of the earth leaves others in the dark. The story of the globalists illuminates some at the expense of others, the left behind, the ones who cannot move, and those who become immobilised because the light no longer shines on them.

To shift the imagery: understanding inter-dependence means seeing how it expands personal and social horizons for some, but also thins bonds with others. At least until those bonds become more meaningful than an Instagram list, there will be much more resistance to integration than we have admitted.

To gain better insights into the dynamics and resistances to integration, to give as much airtime to separation, disintegration and fragility as we do to connection, integration and convergence, we are going to have to get rid of flat-Earth narratives and ideas of global predestination once and for all. We are going to have to account
for how more interdependence can yield more conflict, how for instance, despite growing trade and student exchanges between China and Japan, Beijing can announce (as it did in 2014) two new national holidays to commemorate the victims of Japanese aggression from 1937 to 1945.

Connection, mobility, fusion, oneness: we put our stock in the magnetism of the market and the empathetic power of a cosmopolitan spirit that appeared to take hold of the upper echelons of a higher education committed to an idyll of global citizenship.

I did my own part in the global pivot. For several years, I oversaw Princeton’s internationalisation drive, creating global knowledge supply chains. It never occurred to me, or to others, to ask: what would happen to those less sexy, diminutive, scales of civic engagement? We didn’t worry much. They were the remits of provincialism, quietly escorted from the stage upon which we were supposed to be educating the new *homo globus*.

**During globalisation’s up-cycle, it was easier to overlook the divides. When economies slumped, and globalisation fatigue set in, the gauzy veil came off.**

This does not make global history less pressing. On the contrary. One of the ironies is that the anti-globalism movement is immersed in transnational mutual adoration networks. The day after the Brexit plebiscite, Trump travelled to the UK to reopen his golf resort. The British had ‘taken back their country’, he told the bristle of microphones, then returned home to Make America Great Again. Le Pen’s excitement about Trump is well-known. Fyodor V Biryukov, head of Rodina, the Russian Motherland Party, calls this swarm ‘a new global revolution’. It was, we should recall, the global financial crisis of 2008-9 that did the most to ravage the hopes of one-world dreamers, emanating from the sector that had gone furthest to fuse Westerners and Resterners while creating deeper divides at home: banking.

In short, we need narratives of global life that reckon with disintegration as well as integration, the costs and not just the bounty of interdependence. They might not do well on the chirpy TED-talk circuit, compete with Friedman’s unbridled faith in borderless technocracy, or appeal much to Davos Man. But if we are going to come to terms with the deep histories of global transformations, we need to remind ourselves of one of the historian’s crafts, and listen to the other half of the globe, the tribalists out there and right here, talking back.
