

Global History

Interactions Between the Universal
and the Local

Edited by

A. G. HOPKINS

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- 82 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1690–1815* (Cambridge, 1991). David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York, 2005) includes interesting observations on the history of the words "ethnic" and "ethnicity."
- 83 Lemarchand, "Ethnic Violence," pp. 185–205; Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition," pp. 241–62.
- 84 Anthony D. Smith, "History and National Destiny: Responses and Clarifications," *Nations and Nationalism*, 10 (2004), pp. 195–209, esp. p. 205.

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Afterword: World History
and Globalization

William H. McNeill

The global web of communication that influences everyone and every locality so strongly today is not new. Indeed, if one allows for much slower and far more sporadic communication among fewer people, themselves hemmed in by formidable and seldom crossed geographical barriers, it is nonetheless true that human societies always exchanged messages with strangers and altered behavior every so often when something new and attractive came to their attention. Even the Bering Strait and the water gap between Australia and Asia were sometimes crossed from the time human beings first showed up in Australia and America. Strangers also occasionally brought outsiders' genes to local communities along with new skills and knowledge, so despite its global dispersion, humankind remained a single biological species, shrouded in a slender but single web of communication.¹

Yet recent concern with globalization, which A. G. Hopkins, in the first chapter of this book, dates from the 1990s, is not without basis. For the pace and volume of communication across cultural and geographical barriers intensified so markedly after about 1950 as to disrupt everyday routines and expectations almost everywhere, sometimes with satisfactory but often with painful consequences. Such a world-wide tsunami is indeed new, though the pace of social change had been building up — rather like a nuclear reaction — across millennia until in recent centuries it became unmistakable within a single generation. It started to assume run-away proportions in the nineteenth century, when daily newspapers and instantaneous telegraphic communication were followed by a cascade of new technologies for transport and communications: canals, trains, steamships,

trucks, cars and airplanes, as well as photography, radio, TV, and the internet.

Such novelties were unparalleled and penetrated ever further into urban hinterlands until, by about 1950, most village communities, where the majority of humankind were then still living, began to be affected. With that development the whole of humanity began to respond to new hopes and fears, new visions of the possible, and new disappointments when wished-for change came slowly, if at all, or rewarded some while hurting others who were left behind.

Global History: Interactions between the Universal and the Local explores a wide variety of reactions to the resulting tumult across the past two centuries. These essays are unusual in two respects: the diversity of their subject matter and the cohesion of their approach, seeking always to understand what happened in terms of universal ideas and ideals, coming from afar, interacting with local heritages to produce something new, distinctive and intelligible. The resulting blend of variety and cohesion makes the book a pleasure to read and in my case brought a great deal of completely new information and understanding about Navajo weaving, the Japanese encounter with Adam Smith and Friedrich List, the Universal Races Congress of 1911, and the world-wide spread of recorded music. More familiar subjects – Hegel's philosophy of history, the breakup of the Ottoman empire, Vietnam between 1945 and 1960 and the confusion surrounding the concept of nation and nation state – attained clearer focus for me as well.

Seldom does a collection of historical essays by specialists in such diverse fields achieve so much. The authors were all recruited from the same university, and their essays show the benefits of prolonged personal interactions that lie behind the finished work. My experience with the fierce attachment of specialists to the established patterns of discourse that define and limit their chosen fields of history makes me wonder how Professor Hopkins, who presided over the collaboration, was able to persuade his colleagues to consider what he calls "universals." But the fertility of the result justifies their venture and puts readers in their debt.

Instead of discussing and commenting separately on each chapter, I would like to suggest another kind of universal that seems to me even more significant than those considered elsewhere in *Global History*. Except for the essay on the Navajo, the writers disregard the peasant and ex-peasant majority of humankind, and focus instead on urban elites. To be sure, urban elites always attract historians' attention because they dominate political and other aspects of recorded history. Ever since the rise of urban centers and of the civilizations engendered by cities, the rural majority were largely excluded from governance and lived in semi-autonomous local village communities.

Yet villagers raised the food that kept urban folk alive, and whenever natural or man-made disaster disrupted urban food supplies, as happened often enough in early times, human biological and cultural continuity depended on the survival of villagers and of the agriculture that sustained them and everyone else. From Neolithic times, in short, agricultural villages were the cells of human society where the great majority of human beings lived and died. Cities were parasitic, drawing food and manpower from the countryside, partly by force and the threat of force but also by enticement – by offering better life prospects to immigrants than crowded, land-short villages could match, and by offering rural folk superior goods in exchange for extra food and for the various raw materials they produced.

Little by little, more or less voluntary rural-urban trade, benefiting both parties, tended to increase. Correspondingly, forcible and unrequited transfers from village to city in the form of rents and taxes became less predominant, but never disappeared. Slowly and despite innumerable local setbacks, population increased, technologies of production improved and transport and communication became more capacious. Linkages between city and villages intensified accordingly.

But until about 1950 the majority of human beings still lived in villages and raised most or all of the food they consumed. That elementary fact created a safety net for times of trouble whenever the flow of goods and services that sustained cities experienced temporary breakdown. As recently as 1920, the majority of Americans were farmers, and in times of business crisis many recent urban immigrants could return home to the farm, where they earned their keep by sharing everyday work, and waited out hard times until more attractive city jobs beckoned again. The Great Depression of 1932–38 was so serious in the United States precisely because the rural safety net had by then worn too thin to bear the strain of massive unemployment. Nation-wide relief expenditures became necessary instead, and the welfare-warfare nation state we know today was born.

The post-World War II transformation of urban-rural relationships affected far larger numbers around the globe, with long-term consequences yet to be seen. Details varied from village to village, county to county and continent to continent. I was able to watch what happened in Greece at first hand by visiting six villages at ten-year intervals between 1947 and 1976, observing some of the sudden and drastic changes that came to each community.

Two landmarks were especially significant. Village isolation withered during the civil war of 1946–49, when the American government decided to set up a radio, permanently tuned to broadcasts from Athens, in the public square of every Greek village. When peace returned, roads built during the

guerrilla war to supply government troops allowed rattle-trap trucks and buses to circulate goods and persons as never before, superseding the foot-paths trodden by mule trains and humans that had previously connected hundreds of hill villages with the outside world. As a result, enhanced communication inundated every Greek village with a barrage of urban-generated words, music, and general information that soon made local ways seem old-fashioned and unacceptably restrictive, especially to the young.

This disruptive effect was reinforced in the 1960s, when the Greek government decided to create a national TV network and found it necessary (or at least convenient) to supplement programs generated in Athens by transmitting dubbed American TV sitcoms with which to fill the otherwise empty hours. The effect of exposure to American forms of TV entertainment on Greek family patterns and other folkways was profound. I well remember being asked by the president of a village in Macedonia about a character in a program called *Dallas*, which I had never watched. His surprise at my ignorance was matched by mine at his attachment to, and concern for, a fictional character from the never-never land of American TV. Our roles were suddenly reversed: he was the up-to-date cosmopolitan and I fell behind, an old-fashioned, isolated, ivory-tower academic.

Suffice it to say that the impact of all the new communications changed Greek village life profoundly. So many of the inhabitants of poor hill-villages chose to seek their fortunes in distant cities, whether in Greece, Germany or overseas, that population shrank drastically, and one of the hill-villages I observed turned into an almost uninhabited ruin. Plains villages fared differently, some adjusting successfully by improving their methods of cultivation, and finding more or less satisfactory urban markets for new, labor-intensive crops, both within Greece and abroad. Others were emptied when new machinery made farm work a part-time occupation for a few tractor drivers, supplemented by seasonal (sometimes Albanian and sometimes North African) harvest hands.

Everywhere old ways altered, and inter-generational relations were severely strained. Hollowed out by the mass emigration of vigorous young adults, the villages I studied all lost their sense of local autonomy. Cities were where everything important was concentrated. Emigrants sometimes clustered together in distant cities and sent back substantial sums to their relatives in Greece. Others simply disappeared, as far as their home village was concerned.

In the long run, both biological and cultural continuity come into question. All the villages I studied ceased to constitute tight-knit local communities, where age-old custom taught everyone what to expect and how to behave, so that complex human ties made life worth living, however

materially restricted or downright poverty-stricken those lives might be. That age-old local way of life disintegrated within the 40 years I was able to observe these six villages.

Profound uncertainty about the viability of emergent newly urbanized, partly nationalized, and partly cosmopolitan society prevails, for Greek birth rates, as elsewhere in Europe, have sunk below replacement levels. Unless the trend changes, soon the country as a whole will either wither or have to accept immigrants bearing different biological and cultural heritages from other parts of the world.

Moreover, when the annual food supply depends on the punctual delivery of gasoline and diesel fuel to innumerable trucks and tractors, as is now the case in Greece and most other modern countries, interruption of existing market flows for more than a few weeks raises the specter of catastrophic famine. Local self-sufficiency, the traditional safeguard against urban breakdown, is irretrievably diminished: like all the rest of us, the Greeks now depend on global markets to keep themselves alive. To be sure, global flows of goods and services sustain new wealth and permit some, but not all, to enjoy higher rates of consumption. But the risks are also greater than ever before — so much greater that long-range viability of contemporary global flows through mechanisms of interdependence seems to me to be very precarious.²

Other essays in this book do not touch on this intensely local yet also universal (or close to it) transformation of human society. Only the Navajo weavers can perhaps be counted as peasants, or ex-peasants, and Erika Bsumek does not discuss the communities where the weavers live. She argues that long-standing networks of meanings attached to the art of weaving remain more or less intact and interacted with new patterns of marketing to distinguish Navajo rugs and other textiles from similar woven goods coming from the looms of Zapotec Indians in Mexico. Overall, she concludes, “globalization has strengthened tribal identity by helping to codify and secure craft products to Navajo society” (p. 61).

Success in combining new dyes and designs with local tradition and inherited social discipline — exemplified by the women weavers who approached their looms armed with Spider Woman’s instructions as well as with “clear and positive thoughts” (p. 48) — is unusual. I would like to know more about other segments of Navajo society. What can be said about Navajo young men — the restless social element that pioneered the disruption of Greek village society by rebelling against their fathers’ often heavy-handed authority? And what is the significance of Navajo population dynamics? Population growth and decay inevitably affect all efforts to maintain traditional ways. In particular, whenever a rising generation faces local land shortages, so that

young people of marriageable age cannot inherit as many acres as their parents had grazed or cultivated, drastic measures must ensue – emigration, immiseration, intensification of cultivation, and/or organized robbery and rebellion.

These stark choices confronted most Greek peasants between the late eighteenth century and 1950, for the recent collapse of birth rates reversed long-standing population growth that had strained against the limits of available cultivable land for generations. The Greek peasants whom I observed shared that problem with most of humankind in the post-war decades when run-away demographic growth altered population-land balances in innumerable localities of Asia, Africa and Latin America. And just as in Greece, intensified communications also had disruptive, though never identical, results, and provoked massive migration into cities, frequently across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

It is good to know that tradition and innovation can sometimes reinforce one another, as Erika Bsumek shows happened among Navajo weavers. It is also good to know that interplay between outside universals and local idiosyncrasies occurs in the most diverse contexts, as the other essays in this book demonstrate. But it seems to me also worth knowing that across most of the world another universal has been at work, disrupting age-old local self-sufficiency and village autonomy by folding the rural population into an urban-based, urban-managed, high-tech, flow-through society, whose potentialities for the multiplication of wealth are matched only by its potentialities for unprecedented disaster.

A. G. Hopkins has in fact already explored some instances of rural transformation and village disruption in an earlier book: *Globalization in World History*.³ Perhaps it is time to connect all the diverse urban manifestations of modernization, as sampled in this volume, with the experience of modernity among the peasant and ex-peasant majority of humankind. Only by doing so can we come to grips with human history as it is and always has been: an interconnected whole.

Notes

- 1 This argument is developed in J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-eye View of World History* (New York, 2003).
- 2 For a more extended discussion see William H. McNeill, *The Metamorphosis of Greece since World War II* (Chicago, 1978); and *idem*, *The Disruption of Traditional Forms of Nurture* (Amsterdam, 1998).
- 3 A. G. Hopkins, *Globalization in World History* (New York, 2002).

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