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Book Review: What is Global History? by Sebastian Conrad

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Conrad, Sebastian. *What is Global History?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. viii + 299 pages. Paperback, \$22.95.

Over the past few decades, much ado has been made over the “global turn” in historical scholarship. In *What is Global History?*, Sebastian Conrad—looking at the past, present, and future—maps the development of the field, identifies what makes it distinct, and charts a course for its future to make sense of and help shape this diverse, evolving field.

Chapter one provides an introduction to the book’s themes. It surveys global history’s development and increase in popularity, particularly in the Anglophone world, Western Europe, and East Asia. Conrad perceives global history as developing from earlier world history; while the two terms are often used interchangeably, the former is distinct from the latter. He perceives world history as typically employing a methodology that combines comparisons of separate civilizations with a search for links between them, the latter explained by processes of diffusion. In contrast, global history, defined as “a form of historical analysis in which phenomena, events, and processes are placed in global contexts,” is both a distinct methodology and subject of study (p.5, 11-14). He traces a growing interest in global processes following the Cold War’s demise, the terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001, on the United States, and an ongoing communication revolution, which collectively convinced many that the tools historians had been using to make sense of the past, like the nation-state paradigm, were insufficient. Conrad examines approaches—like comparative and transnational history, world and big history, postcolonial studies, and the history of globalization—that had pioneering global methods and how they set the foundations for a distinct global history. He then outlines broad approaches in global history, including equating it with the history of everything (often tracing an idea or historical formation throughout the ages and globe), a focus on exchange and connections, and reflecting on forms of global integration.

In chapter two, Conrad traces the history of thinking globally. Ideas about the world have changed over time to address particularities regarding present-day conceptions of the global. He argues that a genuine global consciousness formulated in discrete Eurasian regions during the early modern period. During the age of European hegemony, a common narrative of material progress and national development took root, leading to the civilization paradigms of historians like Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, and the Eurocentric macro-perspective of William McNeil. Conrad views post-1945 Marxist approaches to history, concentrating on the history of one country framed in terms of a universal Marxist model of historical development, and those influenced by historical materialism, as influencing the global history approach. In the 1970s, Immanuel Wallerstein and world-systems theory reacted against “world history in one country” (p.33). Conrad also charts the rise of area studies, critiques of Western dominance and Eurocentrism, dependency theory, and subaltern studies as early forays in global history.

Next, Conrad considers approaches to global transformations also seeking to come to terms with modern world dynamics: comparative studies, transnational history, world-systems theory, postcolonial studies, and the concept of multiple modernities.

In chapter four, Conrad outlines global history as a distinct approach (p. 62-89). This particular perspective emerges from the discussion of earlier viewpoints. He discusses the characteristics such forays into the field share; together they form the methodological core of what signifies global history. While the keyword associated with global history has been “connections,” this emphasis alone does not distinguish new methods of study. Global historians examine large-scale structured integration and pursue problems of causation up to the global level.

The next few chapters focus on global history as a methodology and how it can be applied in contemporary historical scholarship. Conrad provides seminal studies exemplifying his points. Chapter five explores how global history rests on the notion of global integration as a defining feature. In chapter six, Conrad argues that global histories should challenge history's spatial parameters, breaking against traditional compartmental thinking; he therefore connects global history to the broader "spatial turn." He surveys four strategies for rethinking global space: constructing large transnational regions, the paradigm of "following," thinking in networks, and writing micro-histories of the global. The subsequent chapter explores how global historical narratives challenge conventional temporal metaphors, especially ones viewing past events as genealogical or developing (i.e. notions of progress, advanced and backward nations, civilized and primitive, etc.). Chapter eight focuses on positionality and centered approaches in global history. Chapter nine explores world-making and concepts in global history.

The final chapter, concentrating on the audience for global history, largely reflects on issues regarding the composition, purpose, and consumption of historical narratives in general and global historical narratives in particular, which can give shape to perceptions about the present. He also summarizes some of the limitations of global history.

By presenting global history as a distinct approach, Conrad echoes some views of earlier historians, like Bruce Mazlish, Raymond Grew, and Wolf Schäfer, who put forth the New Global History in the 1990s. Historians often relate global history with global connections, which typically cross traditional units of analysis like nation-states and cultures. Conrad, however, has a broader conception of global history than the history of globalization, which although a subject of focus within global history—as historians such as Geoffrey Barraclough in the postwar era to contemporary social scientists like Martin Albrow have perceived a new era in the history of

global integration—it is not the sum total of the field. In advocating such a vantage point, Conrad outlines pathways to global history that create a wealth of future opportunity.

What is Global History? is a thoughtful contemplation on the benefits and pitfalls of global perspectives as a means for better understanding change over time written in a clear, accessible style. As Conrad focuses heavily on the methodology and methodological concerns involved in the creation of global history, which has only relatively recently gained broad academic support, upper undergraduate and graduate students, scholars outside the field of global history, and global historians interested in reflecting on their discipline and practice will likely find the book most useful.

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