

Global History: Interactions between the Universal and the Local

Review Number:

648

Publish date:

Friday, 29 February, 2008

Author:

A. G. Hopkins

ISBN:

978-1-40-398793-8

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£18.99

Pages:

315pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Patrick O'Brien

Tony Hopkins, whose magnum opus, co-authored with Peter Cain, occupies the commanding heights for the interpretation of British Imperialism 1688-2000, has become evangelical for the reform of curricula in higher education to encourage historians and their students to engage seriously with globalisation - the leitmotif of our times. (1) To realise that 'noble dream', he has devoted his considerable energy, scholarship, erudition and powers of persuasion to constructing and editing two volumes of essays by Anglo-Saxon groups of historians ranging in age from William McNeill (the doyen of global history), to very young assistant professors from the University of Texas at Austin, where Hopkins is now propitiously located.

Along with growing numbers of converts to this field, these historians all share his vision that it would be nothing less than a complacent abnegation of the political and moral responsibilities of professional historians at this profound juncture in time to fail to make space and allocate resources for the scholarly study of past experiences of societies, local communities and individuals as they became enmeshed (often unwillingly) into larger regional, national, imperial and global units of operation, adaptation and interaction. For historians the challenge of our time is to discover and analyse what might be out there in the records to help all of us understand the long histories of both benign and malign outcomes of multiple types and degrees of interdependency that are now leading at an ever accelerating rate towards an increasingly connected world. (2)

Hopkins's first volume on *Globalization in World History* mobilised eight distinguished members from the faculties of history and oriental studies at the University of Cambridge to historicise globalisation; to expose its chronological longevity and surprising geographical extent; but, above all, to classify and analyse its significance for the histories of Africa and Eurasia alongside the modern American version familiar to our

own times. (3) This became a seminal collection that informed colleagues in the social sciences that there is nothing new under the sun and that the insights of history into the outcomes from previous experiences of 'globalisation' could help them analyse (even theorise) about processes of encounters, connections, integrations and assimilations. These were processes that had persisted for centuries - albeit upon a bounded scale, slower velocity and weaker intensity than the truly profound discontinuity with the past that has marked the period since the Second World War. (4)

Hopkins's second volume has attempted to do something altogether more difficult and ambitious that might hopefully become a paradigm for other departments of history in higher education to follow. Recognising, indeed appreciating, the educated (if not innate) predilections of most historians to research on well specified, geographically confined, chronologically demarcated and historiographically predefined themes and problems, Hopkins somehow managed to persuade six of his younger colleagues and an emeritus professor at Austin to take the risk and sign up for three years of workshops, conversations and flows of emails. In so doing, he was attempting to relocate their own impressive range of expertise in cultural, economic, political, international and intellectual history into a context and mode for discourse that has transformed their research into something recognisably global.

Such collaboration is normal in the natural sciences, becomes ever more common in the social sciences, but remains rare in the humanities. Thus, this enterprise can be represented as nothing less than an institutional and intellectual innovation. The book appeared in 2006 as a model and an injunction to get on with the job after more than three decades of voluminous writing extolling the virtues and stressing the urgent need for global forms of history. (5) Book after book, article after article has proclaimed that the restoration of an ancient historiographical tradition will provide the consciousness for global citizenship, new vistas from space, metanarratives of universal significance, insights and perspectives for the social sciences, a release from the bunkers of national archives and, when properly constructed, an enforced closure of those now tediously outdated postmodern attacks on the condescensions of Eurocentric scholarship. (6)

The problem has long been how to persuade busy historians obsessed (as most of us are) with erudition, detail and context, to respond to the unavoidable and multiple challenges posed by modern globalisation. Hopkins and his team have proceeded by explaining interactions between the local (where they work) and the universal, which they regard as significant because as historians they recognise that globalisation has never (except in superficial senses) been a process of convergence, let alone homogenisation. It has invariably involved diverse adaptations and assimilations to foreign conquests, religious conversions, new technologies, strangers from afar and commodities imported from beyond the boundaries of local societies.

For example, for the last three centuries (not much longer than that) packages of Western 'modernities' have been on offer to (or have frequently been intruded with violence into) Afro-Asian cultures. Their reception has rarely been passive or simple and innovations, whether welcomed, accepted or imposed, are invariably adapted, reformulated and recycled to render the conceptualising of globalisation as diffusion or convergence into a parsimonious, but rather vacuous, theory for the comprehension of humanity's long-run history of connections and interactions. (7)

The Austin model is not the only approach for an engagement with globalisation, but as a way of exposing the past in the present, the east in the west and the universal in the local, it is perhaps more likely to elicit the co-operation and commitment of established academics to matters global than comparative history, which demands a rigorous engagement with at least two historiographies, unfamiliar geographies, alien cultures and very difficult languages. At the very least, the kind of reciprocal comparisons advocated by Marc Bloch requires a more circumscribed and serious mediation through the secondary literature in European languages than has been evident in several recent attempts by famous historians to write on a global scale. (8) For the moment, the Texas paradigm looks set to become the optimal way forward, particularly for genres of historical scholarship that cannot call upon selected and recognisably relevant theories, taxonomies and insights from one or other of the social sciences.

All of the eight essays in this collection - which cover the gamut of political, international, cultural,

intellectual and economic history and include the West as well as Japan, Vietnam, China and the Middle East - are exemplary in different ways and degrees. Historians are invariably more comfortable with, and sympathetic to, examples that take the discussion about global history beyond the levels of historiography and political imperatives towards research and programmes for teaching. (9) Although the introductory chapter by Hopkins is a masterly compression of what those in the history professions need to know and do about a plethora of intellectual, institutional and unifying opportunities that modern globalisation has opened up to restore the traditions of our postmodern, divided and fractious guild; what precisely does each of these essays tell us about interactions between local and global? (10) Is this approach heuristic to contemplate and really extendable as a way of constructing global history?

Three essays by Erika Bsumek, Karl Miller and Mark Metzler make the case for the economic sphere (which happens to be Hopkins's own territory). Most economists are fond of globalisation because the process supposedly maximises gains from trade and leads *ceteris paribus* to faster rates of Smithian growth for the world as a whole. In their models, producers exploit comparative advantages and consumers buy what they want in response to relative prices. However, in a careful analysis of the history of a traded luxury: the rugs woven by Navajo Indians, Erika Bsumek (chapter two) exposes the deeper meanings attached to many traded commodities, both for the skilled Indian weavers (who have produced traditional Navajo rugs for generations) and for modern consumers in the United States, who remain willing to pay higher prices for their own native American products, even though cheaper substitutes are produced by rival Zapotec Indians from Mexico. In Bsumek's fascinating essay, economic abstractions such as 'elasticities' are implicit but are not offered as desiccated numbers. They are explained with reference to a culture and preference for this traditional authentic brand. To generalise: international trade is patterned and ordered by several variables, including cultures, but it may become powerful enough to reorder culture.

Karl Miller teaches both history and music at Austin and his chapter (chapter six) is yet another memorable example of those paradoxical and unintended consequences that flowed from the invention of a machine, in this case to record and market music. During its foundational decades as an industry that matured rather easily to become global (in every conceivable sense of that elastic label), the record industry opted for a strategy to simply record and sell sounds from a single musical tradition, namely the Western classical tradition. Take-off into sustained growth occurred when multinational corporations moved to record multiple varieties of local music before expanding their reach to cater for a truly enormous and elastic world demand for music from every cultural tradition. The industry continued on its path of expansion by way of mutation into hybrid forms of music. Miller's elaboration upon those loops of inter-connections between the local and global could be the very best example we now have of a truly globalised industry. (11)

Economic historians have been discovering that numerous industries, which can be represented by diverse combinations of the local and global, go further back in time than was previously thought. (12) The conjoined names of Adam Smith and Fukuzawa often appear in accounts of Japanese industrial policy. Those historians who wish to include that remarkable off-shore economy as an example in their case studies of late industrialisation must now give precedence to the names of Frederick List and Takahashi Korekiyo (Minister for Commerce and Industry), and to an altogether deeper analysis of Japan's internal mercantilism and competitive state system that existed under the Tokugawa regime.

Mark Metzler's essay (chapter four) provides us with assured scholarship and a guide to the connections between indigenous sources of Japanese economic policy and global currents (flowing from Germany, France and America - not just the United Kingdom) that Japanese statesmen were acutely aware of. En route, he rehabilitates Frederick List as a canonical figure in the global history of economic thought - less celebrated by economists than Adam Smith, but perhaps a more influential source for policies promoting the growth of the world economy. (13)

States, including their constitutional forms and social bases along with their policy responses to challenges and opportunities emanating from beyond their borders, continue to be major players in analyses of interactions between the local and the global. This is true even in the accelerated globalisation of our time (1948-2008), despite the wishes and predictions of neo-liberals that states are giving way to markets.

Emeritus professor Philip White utilises his deep historical knowledge and well-founded antipathy to nationalism to remind us that ethnicity has never been foundational for the development of viable states. Indeed, wherever and whenever a particular ethnic group monopolised political power, disorder and horrifying violence usually ensued. White also emphasises and underlines a major argument in favour of empires, elaborated by Geoffrey Schab's insightful essay on the Ottoman empire's record of rule in the Middle East. Largely for politically prudential reasons, empires (starting with Rome) tend to have better records of tolerance for ethnic, religious and other minorities than nation states. White, looking at current and uncontrollable rates of migration concluded that 'if we are fortunate, globalization will indeed relegate the "nation state" as originally conceived to the dustbin of history', and adds that 'to the extent that a national government is multi-ethnic it would appear to be more compatible with forces ... which globalization has propelled' (p. 258).

Schab's analysis of Arab nationalism as it unfurled across the Middle East following the Ottoman empire's demise and replacement by the mandated governance of Britain and France, is concise and astute. His view rejects the thesis propagated by Bernard Lewis, Samuel P. Huntington and their acolytes, that the current predicaments of the Middle East result basically from an unchanging Islamic tradition refusing to come to grips with modernity. Instead, he favours a more convincing geopolitical explanation that includes; the failures of both mandated powers to establish viable institutional foundations for successor states, the intrusion of the Holocaust (leading to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the region) and the lack of anything more than authoritarian military rule for secular forms of Arab nationalism. Given west Asia's historical, linguistic, ethnic and religious potential for some form of a confederated state, I find it difficult to avoid the inference (not drawn by Schab) that exogeneous global forces (especially the Cold War) have on balance exercised a malign influence on prospects for political and economic development across the Arab world.

My tentative inference also touches on a major debate about connections between the Cold War and globalisation, a metanarrative that Mark Lawrence (chapter eight) uses with consummate skill to reconceptualise the Vietnam conflict (1945-60). Lawrence asks the meta-questions: 'Did the East-West confrontation distance, accelerate, or retard the globalizing process and if so how?' (p. 229). He uses his considerable expertise on Vietnam to support a contestable view that the fragmentation and investment of the entire world in a struggle between two politico-economic systems that claimed universal applicability contributed powerfully to the advance of globalisation. This particular case study certainly demonstrates how and why the Democratic Republic of Vietnam manipulated a conflict between great powers (by appropriating competing versions of Western modernities to local needs) to achieve a unified state and country. But the force of the argument about positive correlations between the Cold War and globalisation depends on the rigorous pursuit of counterfactual analysis.

Two chapters (and the moving afterword by William McNeill musing nostalgically on the lost world of local communities in the rush to the cities of our globalising world economy) address Hopkins's moral conviction that as citizens of the world, professional historians must now reconfigure the teaching and writing of history to make sense of their own times.

Global citizenship, or rather the kind of widespread consciousness required to construct the institutions and cultures necessary to manage the accelerated globalisation of the 21st century, has moved up the agenda for discourses in philosophy, economics, politics and international relations.. (14) Of course, concerns for the welfare of our species as a whole coupled with notions of human rights have been with us since the axial age at the dawn of all the world's great religions. However, the translation of ideals into political agreements, laws and organisations for some measure of predictable enforcement beyond the borders of established empires and sovereign states, only began to take on institutional forms in the 19th century. By 1900, some

200 institutions for an embryonic form of global civil society dealing with slavery, health, labour, prisoners of war, feminism, navigation and communication systems and other matters of universal concern, already existed. Today, in the wake of the 'global associational revolution' that flowed from the foundation of the United Nations after the Second World War, there are probably some 30,000 non- and intergovernmental institutions operating to secure economic development and individual protection, as well as the social, political, cultural, environmental and other public goods necessary for an embryonic community of world citizens. (15) After the awesome destruction of two world wars and a century that perhaps witnessed more widespread and intense violence against human rights than at any other period in history, Tracie Matysik (chapter five) has revealed beams of enlightenment, hope and reason that were coming and gathering momentum around 1911. This was a year that marked a high point for nationalism and geopolitical rivalry, yet a group of famous activists from many quarters of the world convened a Congress to take a principled and persistent stand against racism, imperialism and intolerance of all kinds, and to speak out against Eurocentrism. This Congress, which represents nothing more (in her eloquent depiction) than a 'yearning for ... post modern global civil society', that is so much stronger today, testifies for the strength of cosmopolitan ideals repressed by the outbreak of the First World War (p. 151).

A global civil society requires a 'universalising spirit', a worldwide civic consciousness of the kind, that as Roger Hart's (chapter three) unusually acute reading shows, was present in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. (He would later abandon it in favour of the spirit of the nation, particularly the German volk, thereby excluding nations without such a spirit from world history.) As intellectual history, this essay rescues Hegel from the condescension of crude charges of racism and Eurocentrism that are too easily quoted and attached to his philosophy for world history. I admired this essay, but disagree profoundly with the view that the writings of Joseph Needham, Mark Elvin, Ken Pomeranz, Philip Huang, Jack Goldstone and others (Bin Wong) can be seriously associated with anything Hegel wrote about China. Their concerns, located in that difficult area of comparative history, are to explain how, when and why (after a long history of leadership in the fields of science, technology and economic development) China faltered. (16)

None of these authors represents Chinese history as a record of 'failure'. I notice from notes on the contributions that Roger Hart possesses more credentials (degrees in mathematics, linguistic skills and a refined capacity to read historical texts) than any young scholar I know to take up Joseph Needham's sensitively formulated and still unanswered questions about China. I do hope that he will not succumb to postmodern incredulity towards the kind of metanarratives we all so badly need in order to restore global history to its rightful place, first in higher education, but ultimately and more significantly, in schools and other mediums of mass communication. If he and the young scholars of the quality Hopkins mobilised at the University of Texas do not construct narratives about the world that promote a greater sense of global citizenship, then others with more insidious and unenlightened agendas will continue to purvey the kind of geist that marked the history of the last century. Stoicism is all very well, but as Voltaire and his generation showed, historians (as Hopkins hopes) should be better than that. (17)

The editor is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further

Notes

1. A. G. Hopkins and P. Cain, *British Imperialism: 1688-2001* (Harlow: Longmans, 2001). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. Held et al, *Global Transformations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Globalization in World History*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (London: Pimlico, 2002). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. P. Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. P. K. O'Brien, 'Historiographical Traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history', *Journal of Global History*, 1 (2006). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. J. R. McNeill and W. H. McNeil, *The Human Web. A Bird's Eye View of World History* (New York:

- Norton, 2003). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. J. M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000). [Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. *Making Sense of Global History*, ed. S. Solvi (Oslo: Universitets Forlaget, 2001). [Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. E. Jones, *Cultures Merging: A Historical and Economic Critique of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). [Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. *Leviathan: Multinational Corporations and the New Global History*, ed. A. D. Chandler and B. Mazlish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). [Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. K. Moore and D. Lewis, *Birth of the Multinational: 2000 Years of Ancient Business History* (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press, 1999). [Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. A. Macfarlane, *The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan and the Malthusian Trap* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1997). [Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. K. S. Jomo and E. Reinert, *The Origins of Development Economics: How Schools of Economic Thought Have Addressed Development* (London: 2ed Books, 2005). [Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. J. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (London: Allen Lane, 2002); and B. Mazlish, *The New Global History* (London: Routledge, 2006). [Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. T. Brook and G. Blue, *China and Historical Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). [Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. (17) M. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997). [Back to \(17\)](#)

Other reviews:

muse

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jwh/summary/v020/20.3.vink.html> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/648>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3622>

[2] <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jwh/summary/v020/20.3.vink.html>