

What is Global History?

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Like most practitioners in global history, Pamela Kyle Crossley, in *What is Global History*, engages this simple yet profoundly provocative question: ‘how to tell a story without a centre?’ In a smallish, 120-page treat of the question, Crossley provides a gripping overview of the field, along with its genealogy, trends and possibilities.

Crossley weaves her study through four analytical-cum-narrative categories, which, in Crossley’s own words, are the following: ‘divergence’ (the narrative of things diversifying over time and space from a single origin); ‘convergence’ (the narrative of different and widely spaced things necessarily assuming similarities over time; ‘contagion’ (the narrative of things crossing boundaries and dramatically changing their dynamics at the same time; and ‘systems’ (the narrative of interacting structures changing each other at the same time). The book opens with a chapter on what Crossley terms ‘the great story impulse’, by which she shows, using oral traditions and literary and religious-textual evidences, how people in different cultures have sought to tell stories of connections with the rest of the humankind. This has been true of the classical and medieval periods as well as our own time. So, to Crossley, the story we now want to tell through global history is a continuation of a ‘great story impulse’ that has driven intellectual and imaginative domain since the emergence of man. How can we map the four conceptual-narrative categories onto this millenarian ‘great story impulse’?

In terms of ‘divergence’, examples are taken from, for instance, Wilhelm Schmidt, who argued that all religions were originally monotheistic, the Jesuits, who argued that the Chinese were not alien or barbaric, but that their culture evolved from the same roots as those of Europe and the Middle East, and the narratives of great epochs of global migrations from either Africa or Northeast Asia. With ‘convergence’ Crossley

takes up the example of the origin of agriculture which has not been explained adequately through diffusionist or ‘divergence’ theories. She supports the idea that the global expansion of agriculture can be explained by the theories of human development taking place in different places, implying that agriculture has multiple origins. Crossley then goes on to critique the Marxist discourse of transformation from feudalism to capitalism, Weber’s modernization theories, and Kuhn’s science-centric narrative of modernity—all of which Crossley tends to see as Euro-centric, or at least informed by European historical experiences. However, through using the theory of ‘convergence’ by Dutch economist Jan Tinbergen, Crossley argues that ‘there are important dialects of dialectics, and contradictions over the contradictions, that still keep Marx and Engels at the center of speculation that humanity may be subject to universal material forces that will eventually vanquish all cultural estrangements’. Crossley takes up these points with regard to the second and fourth categories.

In terms of ‘contagion’, Crossley, not surprisingly, touches on themes that political scientists and sociologists, including Hegel, Marx, Kuhn or Weber, did not seriously consider. This takes her to the broader field of environmental history. Drawing on Alfred Crosby (1), William McNeill (2), Jared Diamond (3) and Sheldon Watts (4), Crossley shows that global history has been fostered no less convincingly by diseases, contamination, germs and biological elements than by ideologies and social and economic forces. With regard to the last of her categories, ‘systems’, Crossley depends on Pirenne’s argument that material interactions between different systems, such as trade, fostered historical transformations of global scale. For instance, Europe’s economic rise owed much to interactions between systems: ‘Islamic empire’s economy and the local economies of Europe interacted in such a way as to transform Europe itself...the Islamic trade system was the originating actor, and Europe the reactive one’ (p. 88). Crossley then draws on Braudel’s ecology of sea and land routes around the Mediterranean and Wallerstein’s world system that extends Braudel’s study by attempting to explain the global political economy of dependency. But, as Crossley takes it from the critique of Wallerstein by Andre Frank, a more materialistic and objectivist world system view has since been liquidated by cultural theories and subjectivity.

So, Crossley responds to her question, ‘how to tell a story without a center’?, through multiple stories with multiple centres. She seems to be happy about it, because she does not particularly strive to see a distinction or convergence between ‘global’ and ‘world history’. By not pinning the possibility of a global history on the postmodern condition only, Crossley takes a different path to that of Bruce Mazlish, who sees a clear distinction between ‘global’ and ‘world history’. For Mazlish, global history seeks to attain objectivity by undermining the subjective agencies of culture and concentrating more on the materially oriented disciplines such as artificial intelligence, epidemiology, neurology, paleobotany and so on. Crossley, on the other hand, does not deal with this problem of the distinction between ‘world’ and ‘global’ history because she does not point to a single origin or discourse of global history - neither to the teleology of Hegel and Marx or more recently of Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington or Bruce Mazlish. It is in this context that Crossley finds that ‘actual history of human diversity is more football-like, vase-like, or violin-like than pyramidal’ (p.120). This approach makes the book a far more interesting and nuanced statement of global history. If she fails to tell a story without a centre, she does it with the conviction that there is no culminating point in global history and that no amount of disciplinary materiality can achieve objectivity in global history. Her points are quite simple: ‘history as we know it is written in language, usually prose (as contrasted to pictures, equations, dances, or melody lines), which is linear and subject to perceptions of writer and reader’ (p.106).

Thus although Crossley uses four broad categories to analyze global history, she remains perceptually plural. But this categorization, at the same time, can prove problematic in terms of global history’s thematic reach. She suggests this structure seems to be the ‘most heuristically valuable’. But the heuristic value of it does not solve the problem of ontological fluidity of disciplines and discourses. For instance, the problem of categorization between ‘convergence’ and ‘divergence’ is not merely related to the way how a phenomenon can be explained by both these categories, but to a more important problem as to how to locate globality in an event or a series of events that are not informed by any of these specific categories. For instance, how do we grasp the ways in which the global concourse of ideas, events and practices have dislocated not only Europe but many other ‘indigenous’ claim to ethnocentrism across the world, as the recent work of C. A.

Bayly (5) perceptively shows. Within the categorical limits set by herself, Crossley finds no broader space for issues like the evolution of the middle class, multinational corporations, or environmental resistance at the global level.

At the end this is an exercise in capturing historiographical debates, thus offering a crisp summary of many major works in the area along with the intervening glittering insight of the author herself. But more than anything else, most of Crossley's readers may relish the fact that her 'football' of global history takes a flight clearly above the apex of the 'pyramid' of global history.

Notes

1. Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CN, 1972).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Oxford, 1977).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies* (London, 1997).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sheldon Watts, *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism* (New Haven, CT, 1997).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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