

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Bruce Mazlish, Ralph Buultjens.** *Conceptualizing Global History*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993. \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-1683-3; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-1684-0.

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Professor David Christian recently inaugurated a lively discussion on H-World concerning the definition of world history. Although I did not maintain a score sheet, my impression is that most participants in the discussion took interactions between peoples participating in large-scale historical processes to be one of the principal concerns of world history. Thus, world history represents (among other things, no doubt) a dialogue between the past and the present, in that it seeks to establish a historical context for the integrated and interdependent world of modern times.

The volume under review assumes a somewhat different understanding of world history, against which it proposes global history as an appropriate approach to the recent past and to contemporary times. In his opening essay, "An Introduction to Global History," Bruce Mazlish does not define world history precisely, but portrays it as an effort to deal with all the world's past—an approach that makes room for all peoples in an admirable effort to provide an alternative to Eurocentric conceptions of the past, but that suffers because it lacks principles of selection that might help it to focus analysis in the most useful ways. While this characterization probably applies well enough to some textbooks, most world historians (myself included) will likely regard it as an uninformed and inadequate description of world history as a subfield of the larger discipline of history.

In any case, as an alternative to world history, Mazlish proposes global history as an approach dealing with the processes that have given shape to the globalized world of the present: global history deals with the genealogy and development of globalization. As the factors of globalization, Mazlish mentions the exploration of space, satellite communications links, nuclear threats that individual states cannot control, envi-

ronmental problems that likewise do not respect political boundary lines, and multinational corporations that influence the economic fortunes of peoples throughout the world. Mazlish suggests that in dealing with these themes, global history should avoid Eurocentric conceptualizations, find units of analysis more appropriate than national states, and pay careful attention to the dialectic between global and local developments.

Following Mazlish's introduction, the volume offers ten essays that explore themes of global history. While throwing useful light on the present world, two of them largely overlook the historical dimension of their themes. Neva R. Goodwin's contribution, for example, offers a splendid analysis of environmental problems in contemporary times, but without situating current conditions in larger historical context. Similarly, Richard J. Barnett and John Cavanagh discuss the global economy in illuminating, but strictly contemporary terms.

Of the remaining essays, four deal with theoretical and historiographical issues: Wolf Schafer calls for studies of global processes as manifested in local experiences that lend themselves to close analysis; Ralph Buultjens envisions research and reflection that draw on the categories and viewpoints of third-world as well as western peoples; Manfred Kossok's posthumous essay places global history in the longer historiographical tradition of universal history; and Bruce Mazlish suggests that global history reflects both modern and postmodern perspectives on the world, while also possessing the potential to transcend both. Three essays explore specific themes of global history: Wang Gungwu outlines patterns of migration in modern times; Louis Menand III discusses the emergence of human rights as a global value; and John Joyce argues that globalized western music has transformed the world's musical culture. The volume con-

cludes with Raymond Grew's reflections on the potential of global history to offer an alternative to "the heroic, national narratives on which our discipline is founded" (p. 245).

Even from this quick review, it is clear that global history as represented in this volume does not always avoid Eurocentric formulations. Menand makes a powerful case for "Human Rights as Global Imperative," even though he is well aware of the practical and cultural obstacles to the realization of human rights in many parts of the world. Yet human rights discourse is an almost exclusively western affair, and there are many in the world who regard efforts to advance human rights as a cultural Trojan horse designed to impose western values or promote western interests throughout the world. Granting that this position often enough cloaks self-interest or paranoia or both, still Menand's analysis could have become much richer and deeper if the author had followed Buultjens' advice and taken seriously the perspectives of third-world critics of human rights discourse. Eurocentrism is a problem also in Joyce's essay on globalized western music. No doubt his analysis is accurate, so far as it goes. Yet there should be room in a global-historical study for such remarkable musical phenomena as reggae and other Afro-Caribbean traditions, which Paul Gilroy has discussed admirably in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London, 1987) and *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

Despite the residual Eurocentrism of some of the essays in the volume under review, global history has strong potential to make useful contributions to histori-

cal studies. Wang Gungwu's essay on "Migration and Its Enemies" addresses particularly important issues. In examining patterns of migration, Wang draws attention to the increased prominence of sojourners—temporary migrants who fully intend to return to their homelands and have opportunities to do so—as opposed to permanent migrants. Transportation and communications technologies that make sojourning a practical possibility also have deep implications for the experiences of diaspora communities, relations between migrants and host communities, and connections between migrants and their homelands—themes that figure prominently in the recent postcolonial literature on diasporas, as represented, for example, in the journal *Diaspora* (published since 1991 by Oxford University Press).

Apart from analytical innovation, the global history project has an ambitious larger agenda. Mazlish suggests that global history has deeper policy implications than most other historical studies, and Goodwin expects it to help identify ecological and environmental policies that will bring about sustainable development. Both Buultjens and Kossok view global history as a means to inculcate a generalized global consciousness that will contribute to the resolution of global problems. Finally, the global history project promises at least two further volumes of essays on *Global Civilizations and Local Cultures* (edited by Wolf Schafer) and *Global History and Migrations* (edited by Wang Gungwu), which will bring additional texture to the global history approach. Like the volume under review, the volumes in preparation will no doubt make valuable contributions for the purposes of world as well as global historians.

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