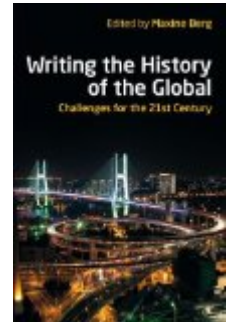


Maxine Berg, ed.. *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the Twenty-first Century*. British Academy Original Paperback Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 220 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-726532-1.



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Maxine Berg proclaims that “Global history” encompasses a new approach to historical writing which has emerged during the past fifteen years” (p. 1). Thus begins her ambitious edited volume *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the Twenty-first Century*. Such a seemingly innocuous opening assertion, we find in the chapters to follow, is open to contestation or at least provocation. Such contestation is a prime example of not only the challenges but also the richness of the debates around and of a “global” history. In short, the volume contains an ironic twist that is endemic of the emerging “approach” of global history itself—even if one is not possible, in the striving *for* a global history we find a variety of useful developments (methods, arguments, normative suggestions, and the like) that are worthy of our attention and praise.

Berg’s volume derives from a 2009 conference held by the British Academy, and the structure and organizing theme is evident throughout the published volume. Following a very useful introductory chapter by Berg, the book is separated

into four parts. Part 1, “Interpretations: Ideas and the Making of Global History,” with chapters by David Washbrook, Jan de Vries, and Jean-Frederic Schaub, provides an overview of “what” global history is or what it might be, and what it might not be. Part 2, “Methods and Methodologies in Global History,” collects contributions from Prasannan Parthasarathi, R. Bin Wong, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, which critically engage *how* such a global history can and perhaps already has been “done.” Part 3, “Shaping Global History,” includes essays from Kenneth Pomeranz and Kaoru Sugihara, and focuses on the concept of “divergences” and comparisons across regions. Part 4, “Knowledge and Global History,” provides examples of global history as constituted in and through particular processes or objects, including technology (Dagmar Schafer’s chapter), as well as art and artifacts (chapters by Craig Clunas, and Glenn Adamson and Giorgio Riello, respectively). The conclusions to the volume and the discussion are found in part 5, titled simply “Round Table,” with short reflective essays by John Darwin,

Megan Vaughan, Peer Vries, and Sufufi So and Billy Kee-Long So.

There is a lot to commend in this motivated volume. It sets out to tackle a difficult and twofold task--establishing how or what a "history of the global" would mean, and, further, how to write about that history. By gathering a group of talented and fairly interdisciplinary historian voices, the book's key overarching accomplishments are in parts 1 and 2, which acknowledge the necessity of multiple methods, disciplinary perspectives, and theoretical frameworks to characterize global history; and in a more limited sense, in parts 3 and 4, which demonstrate how such a global history can be written, organized, institutionalized, and characterized.

We are not always privy to what debates or processes actually placed us at what Berg titles in her introductory chapter this "key moment of shifting ... subject areas" into global historical writing (p. 14), but Berg's chapter itself is worthy of some attention precisely because of its admirable summary and organization of the key preceding "moments" or processes in the development of a history of the global. Specifically, Berg posits several disparate resources or preceding locations that fixated, if not influenced, a making of a global history. One obvious location is found within the "globalization debates" of the 1980s and 1990s, but this is a location (deemed the "penthouse level" of history by Jan De Vries [p. 32]), according to Berg's characterization, that was inherently problematic and not nearly as novel in the development of a global history. Instead, one can go back as far as antiquity, when a type of "global" was acknowledged and treated, from the "Han and Tang China ... to Arab, Persian and Hindu traditions" (p. 4), all the way through the 1970s and the global approaches arising out of Marxist and specifically world systems research, to even more recently, the movement by postmodern and postcolonial approaches that helped to deconstruct and challenge the national histories

and even area studies approaches to history. Other perspectives relevant to such a development of a "global" history--such as the focus on "microhistory"--sought to recapture what such historians felt was the lost agency of human actors within the broader, sometimes grandiose, historical processes. And Berg posits a more recent trend back to comparative/regional histories as a method toward articulating what "global" looks like that has influenced and worked through, from, and between regions. In this manner, a key moment in the development of global history was the way in which historians could articulate a reaction to modernity, as exemplified by Pomeranz's focus on convergence and "divergence." In this way, global history has, according to contributor Washbrook, "helped to rescue economic history from its darkest hour and make it relevant once again" (p. 29).

These stages or locations were beset with their own drawbacks, as the contributions that follow Berg's chapter identify, but they do at least point to the feasibility of a "global" history not only being possible but also already practiced (albeit in modest form) by scholars in the past and present. Going forward, then, Berg suggests a twofold basis for global history. First, such a history should be comparative or regional and focus on the "connections" between regions, an approach exemplified via the "model of asymmetries" asserted in Schaub's chapter. As that compelling essay demonstrates, such an approach need not be cosmopolitan or optimistic in its articulation--in fact such an approach would equally note the "frames of human history," such as "invasion, occupation and absorption, inflicted by societies upon other societies" (p. 59). Berg also suggests an institutional reconfiguration necessary for the writing and researching of global history, one that acknowledges the "need to work with the theories, findings and techniques" of disciplines outside of history, which thus moves historians "from traditional models of the lone researcher to alternative academic models, experimenting with teamwork, networks, and electronic forums" as

well as “transnational research networks” (p. 13). This suggestion, too, is developed further by other contributions, most vividly in Van Zanden’s chapter which calls for, at the very least, “global datasets” that the “right institutions” can bring together (pp. 108-110), however ambitious of a task that may be.

As my opening paragraph intimates, one additional thematic contribution of this volume is its recognition, across the essays, of the difficulties in establishing such a “global” history. This is especially true with its refreshingly frank take on the problems with previous grandiose, Western, and largely Eurocentric ways of writing global history. In this vein, chapters 2, 4, and 8, by Washbrook, Schaub, and Pomeranz, are admirable contributions, focusing on the problems with fissures and divergences and the drawbacks to even promising methods or approaches to the global.

Although not explicitly stated, the volume as a whole is keenly aware of the normative drawbacks to the preceding ways of doing history and characterizing history. For instance, how can one do comparison—seemingly in an attempt to, as Parthasarathi, who is a supporter of the method, asserts, “identify and interpret mutual influences” in arguing for a “global history” (p. 74)—without at the same time reifying the differences (and thus incompatibilities) between the regions or units being compared? Further, as past practices of comparison suggest, cannot these comparisons reinforce a “Eurocentrism” that prides itself as the model, the default, of historical development as a marker or “yardstick” of comparison? Contributors confront such thorny issues, with Jan De Vries unapologetically asserting that a global history that does “not challenge Eurocentric historical narratives” essentially does “nothing” (p. 42). In this vein, some of the most creative devices in *Writing the History of the Global* are those acknowledging this difficult balance. Schaub’s chapter provides a way to confront the asymmetry of contacts between regions being “compared,” and

Sugihara’s chapter inverts the “yardstick” by using an East Asian perspective to assess the “European miracle” of growth that plots “Europe, not the rest of the world, [as] that which diverged from the general trend of ‘smithian growth’” (pp. 132-134). A more strident defense of the method of comparison comes through in Parthasarathi’s piece, which places the problems with it not on the method per se but the “historical determinism” that usually accompanies comparison, one that uses the “European path of development” as the “norm” (pp. 75-76)—as exemplified by such works as Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) and Eric Jones’s *The European Miracle* (1981), to name just two.

There are, however, some shortcomings of the book for those approaching it, as I did, from the field of international relations. With the recognition that this volume is a collection of mainly historians and written within the debates over a global history that resonate among historians, the volume still presumes a lot from the audience. Tensions and discussions that have played a large role in the writing of global history, such as the “divergence” debates, play from an outsider’s vantage point a somewhat oversized role in the volume. Further, the voice of contributors seems to be fairly collectively contained, speaking to the topics that seem to have animated the conference which served as a springboard for the volume, but rarely seeking to expand the audience past those conversations. For instance, Schaub invokes an otherwise well-known “moment” of pessimistic-optimistic prophesizing by referring to the essays produced at the end of the Cold War by Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama. But in doing so, Schaub asks the reader to “consider the general consensus among European historians against” these two “popular essays from the USA,” without giving us a hint as to what, precisely, that general consensus is or was (p. 62). Clunas’s fascinating chapter is nevertheless riddled with references to key moments or arguments found in the field of art history, such as the letters of Bernard

Berenson, a “dominant figure in the connoisseurship of Italian Renaissance art” (p. 168), but the relevance on global history is not immediately, or even secondarily, apparent. This is all reinforced with the rather provincial concluding section, which brings together contributors to issue some thoughts on the preceding essays, a format that likely makes sense in a conference setting but one that has less effect in an edited volume. In short, even though some of those essays (such as Sufumi So and Billy Kee-Long So’s contribution on the identification of a “global identity”) are incredibly provocative and fascinating, they leave the reader with little more than an impressionistic sense of “where” to go from here in “doing” a history of the global, and largely without any direction outside of the discipline of (and subdisciplines within) history.

Two further drawbacks, albeit by no means fatal ones, can be identified. Despite Washbrook’s claim, at the beginning of chapter 2, that global history is “not international history,” by which he means “a history of the world written simply in terms of the relations between different “national” or “proto-national” entities, many of the examples or suggestions for a global history in the volume are most assuredly by this definition “international” (p. 21). Several contributions focus on China (Schefer’s chapter 10) or Chinese art (Clunas’s chapter 11), or depend on (as mentioned above) the connections between regions and countries or civilizations (as evidenced in Adamson and Riello’s vivid chapter on “global objects”). The point here, and again it seems only a minor one to make, is that even if a global history has to be “global” it still must depend on an international or even local context to be made apparent or real or illustrative. Related to this, someone from an interdisciplinary field like international relations will notice a rather puzzling omission of where we might “find” or at least consult, the global—in the so-called global cities examined by sociologists like Saskia Sassen,[1] a location that

would lead one to consult the diverse field and subsequent methods of urban studies scholars.

Finally, and albeit with an admirable collection of essays and scholars who approach this ambitious project with clear eyes and diverse recognition of the inherent tensions that exist in practicing a history of the global, the volume spends more time on how we might go about a global history without fully or adequately addressing why we *need* global history. What is its value? Only briefly does such a normative incentive peek through in the volume, such as Washbrook’s assertion in one key passage that a “global history may ... serve as a critical tool to advance further that questioning and destabilization of received wisdom, or certainty.” It can do so by challenging “authenticity, determinacy, and authorship” (p. 23). Such a critical perspective is found in bits and pieces throughout this volume, but one wonders whether something as audacious as “a *global* history” cannot also fall into the trap of pushing forward its own sense of certainty, determinacy, and authenticity. Can those who take away from this rich volume its forceful contributions in the form of a set of tools or suggestions on what global history entails, what it should include (and, ostensibly, exclude), and how it should be promoted also ask whether we need such a history in order to make sense of the “global” problems or processes that surround us in the first place?

Note

[1]. In fact, I would note that some historians interested in “global history,” such as Anton Rosenthal of the University of Kansas (among likely many others), also convey an intense interest in cities as sites of the global. See <http://history.drupal.ku.edu/anton-roenthal>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

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