

Conference 1: The University of Warwick –17-19 May, 2018

A Different Point of View: Scales, Spaces and Contexts in Histories of the Local and the Global

What do we mean by the micro and the macro in our new histories where deep histories at a local level must now reach out to wider contexts, perhaps to distant comparisons and to global frameworks? But more significantly, global history must now with urgency-engage with the particularities of local spaces and the diversities of lived environments. The early initiative of global history arose out of histories of the economy, resources and the environment, and the result has been the accumulation of large data sets and large comparative projects across time and space. Precisely these subjects of the economy - commercial interaction, encounters and networks, and urban and rural environments - stand most to gain from new research into local practices, specific events and individual lived experiences. This conference will focus on issues of scale and the local in economic and commercial practices and connections, in the lived environment of cities, the countryside and maritime spaces. It will look to the global framing of ‘the local’.

If we turn to older historiographical traditions we find a long institutional tradition of -local historians: they worked on local industries, local elites and local conflicts. But where did this tradition go? We had many regional and local historians who became cut off from mainstream directions of a social science-informed historical writing that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. And this separation occurred despite the pronouncements of some in the Annales School such as Pierre Goubert, who wrote ‘The careful practice of local history and the multiplication of monographs on specific regions may....serve to destroy many of the general conceptions that once seemed so strong.’ (Goubert, 1971). Frequently the ‘local’ as it was then studied was a unit chosen and studied in isolation, with little exploration of how its boundaries were permeable and connected to other spaces.

Micro historians had a different context. They focussed on an individual, or an individual event recreated out of the close reading against the grain of a single episode, and often involving a legal case. Their records were often those of inquisition and court cases, and revealed individual histories of transgression. The micro historians challenged the large social-scientific paradigms of modernization, economic growth and family formation. Their cases were not representative; indeed they were often exceptional. Was there any way to compare and connect them? Were the cultural anthropology and interrogation of

the texts they deployed with such mastery the methods that confined this approach to a very specific genre of cultural history?


Social scientists during the 1990s returned to the place of the local, but this time in their framing of the large processes of globalization. They noted that a new focus on a connected world had left local experiences under-rated. Giddens wrote of local transformations within globalization, but his concern was on the impact of globalization on local societies. Appadurai argued that globalization was also a localizing process. The histories of these localities became subject to the ‘dynamics of the global’.

When historians came to this debate what they tried to do was to connect the regions and ‘localities’ of their deep archival research to wider analytical and spatial units. With the advance of global history into many historical specialisms – indeed its move from a specialist approach in the 1990s and early 2000s to a major framework of many types of historical writing from economic history to political and intellectual history - we now face a parallel moment to that of the key years of microhistory during the 1980s.

Large-scale global histories seek comparison across distant times and spaces; comparing like with unlike. These global histories have focussed on comparison; but connection is also part of global history. It is in the study of those connections that find the agency and events that many historians want to study. But context is all. Historians need now, as Francesca Trivellato has argued, to address multiple contexts, and consider the flexibility and variability of scale and distance. With this diversity of contexts can we find ways to connect or compare spaces, events and individuals? Can we apply the methodologies of microhistory; its archival base and close reading of texts in considering other sources once little analysed by historians: objects in museums and archaeological sites, maps and city plans and the digital imaging now possible, or histories and myth preserved through oral transmission?

In this new historiographical period emerging in the wake of both anti-globalization movements and a new national politics, especially post Brexit and Trump, global historians need to take stock and look seriously at what they are doing. Jeremy Adelman recently in his ‘What is Global History Now?’ claims that global history’s emphasis on cosmopolitan commonness gave ‘globalisation a human face.’ ‘It privileged motion over place, *histoires qui bougent* (stories that move) over tales of those who got left behind, narratives about others for the selves who felt some connection.’ Historians lost the voices of the locally-rooted and of those who had been left behind in the big push for cosmopolitan interdependence. As Adelman writes:

‘If we are going to muster meaningful narratives about the togetherness of strangers near and far, we are going to have to be more global and get more



serious about engaging other languages and other ways of telling history. Historians and their reader-citizens are also going to have to re-signify the place of local attachments and meanings.’

Just how we do this must be a driving problem for our conference. We cannot go back to those hermetically-sealed local histories of past eras; nor can we return to the practice and ethos of earlier microhistory which was of its own time and specific political framing. Globalization is a driving force of our modern world, and global history must respond to this. Global frameworks of connections and comparison do shape how many of us now write about ‘the local’ and agency. Our conference will discuss our research and papers on specific ‘localities’, micro spaces, economic and social interactions and events. We can look at these approaches in the first instance at the concrete level of physical spaces, lived environments, cities, mobilities of peoples, commercial interactions, encounters and networks. The economic and environmental historians who first initiated a key branch of global history compared economic factors from resources, capital investment, demographic regimes and financial institutions across vast spaces and chronologies. The large comparative data sets they built, though revealing trends and divergences, hid the distinctive local practices, individual lived experiences in urban, rural and maritime settings and the texture and disjunctures of encounters, interactions and mobilities. Investigation of these themes with this perspective of the ‘local and the global’ can enrich our understanding of the ‘economic’.