

Writing Global History and Its Challenges—A Workshop with Jürgen Osterhammel and Geoffrey Parker

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On 4 June 2016, Jürgen Osterhammel of the University of Konstanz and Geoffrey Parker of Ohio State University gave an all-day workshop on global history for graduate students and junior and senior scholars of the Universities of Dundee and St. Andrews in Scotland. The workshop consisted of three discussion sessions, each with a different theme, namely the conceptualization(s), parameters, and possible future(s) of global history. The central question was to what extent this fast-changing field required adjustments of “normal” historiographical methodologies and epistemologies. The workshop participants agreed that global history focuses in particular on connections across large spaces or long timespans, or both. Yet reconstructing these webs of connections should not obscure global inequalities. In the case of empires, many of the exchanges across space and time have been ordered in a hierarchical fashion—metropolises profiting from peripheral spaces, for example—and imposed by certain groups of people on others, resulting in, for example, the enslavement or extermination of indigenous peoples. As historians, we should also ask ourselves what we do about peoples or areas that were or remain unconnected, local, and remote. Where does globalization end?

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Introduction

On a pleasantly warm and sunny day—somewhat unusual for Scotland—twenty graduate students and academics from the Universities of Dundee, Edinburgh, and St. Andrews gathered in Dundee for a workshop on global history. Dr. Martine van Ittersum and Dr. Felicia Gottmann, members of the Scottish Centre for Global History, organized the event, which was co-sponsored by the Universities of Dundee and St. Andrews, the journal *Itinerario*, and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. In three lively workshop sessions, the participants discussed the state of the field—conceptualization(s), parameters, and possible future(s)—with two of the most

distinguished global historians working today, Professor Jürgen Osterhammel of the University of Konstanz and Professor Geoffrey Parker of Ohio State University.¹

Geoffrey Parker, author of *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change, and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (2013), was born in Nottingham in 1943, and grew up amid the destruction caused by World War II. “As I looked at the streets and noted the surprising absence of one or more houses, I remember thinking: ‘Great and terrible things have happened here, and I want to find out why.’” He went to Christ’s College, Cambridge, to read history in 1962, and almost immediately had his first direct encounter with global history: “During my first term as an undergraduate, for the only time in my life so far, I thought I was about to die.” The Cuban Missile Crisis had brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, and Parker recalled how “After eating dinner together in the college hall on the night of 25 October 1962, my friends and I all shook hands and said goodbye. We rated our chances of seeing another dawn at about 50/50. When I read the accounts of John F Kennedy’s discussions with his advisers in the ‘ExComm,’ all of them apparently prepared to fight the USSR to the last European, I think we were a trifle optimistic.”²

Parker did not study global history at Cambridge (no courses were offered), but he became enthralled by Sir John Elliott’s lectures on the history of early modern Europe, and in particular by the question why Spain, the greatest empire of its day, failed to suppress the Dutch Revolt. Under Elliott’s supervision, and thanks in part to the generosity of Fernand Braudel, who opened the doors of several French provincial archives for him, Parker completed *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567–1659: The Logistics of Victory and Defeat in the Low Countries Wars* (1972). Four years later, while teaching at the University of St. Andrews, he received an invitation to serve as a scholarly consultant for the *Times Atlas of World History*: his first encounter with global history as an intellectual endeavour.³ Still, he has never offered courses on the topic for either undergraduate or graduate students, instead teaching early modern European and military history at St. Andrews, the University of British Columbia, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Yale University, and Ohio State University. In 2012, the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie voor Wetenschappen (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) awarded him the biennial Heineken Foundation Prize for History.

Parker’s current project—a biography of Charles V (1500–1558), Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain—took him in 2014 to the University of Konstanz. The University Library contains copies of no less than 120,000 letters written by or to Charles V. This led to a chance encounter between Parker and Jürgen Osterhammel, a professor at Konstanz and the author of the magisterial *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (2009; English translation, 2014).

Osterhammel explained that he, too, had never taught global history—a subject unknown under that label at any of the universities where he was employed. In fact, he considers himself less international than the younger generation of German historians—for example, he continues to write his books in German. When he began

his graduate work in the 1970s, the historical profession in Germany was still very Eurocentric. Historians who specialized in non-Western fields found themselves on the margins of the profession. Consequently, his Ph.D. thesis on the history of Chinese foreign relations (1980) was published three years later not as a work of history but in a Sinological book series.⁴ He never experienced a personal turn or conversion to global or world history. Instead, he has always taught courses on the history of China, the British Empire, and European colonialism. In his view, British and German approaches to global history make for an interesting comparison. Global history in Britain can be conceived of as a broadening and modernizing of the well-established field of imperial history. Germany, which never had much of an overseas empire and little imperial historiography, partly imported global history from abroad and partly profited from the influence of the Bielefeld School of comparative European history, now slowly establishing links with *Aussereuropäische Geschichte*, that is, “non-European history.” Jürgen Kocka, the great social historian, for example, has recently undertaken a global history of capitalism.⁵

Although Osterhammel’s *The Transformation of the World* contains over 1,100 pages, he does not believe that every global historian should inflict big books on the reading public. Moreover, *The Transformation of the World* is based on secondary literature out of necessity, not as a matter of personal preference. Osterhammel feels that, given the scope of the book, he should have consulted a huge number of documentary collections—but there were no sabbaticals or institutional funding for extended journeys to archives. Some have wondered why, having focused on eighteenth- and twentieth-century topics before, he opted for the nineteenth century in *The Transformation of the World*. The reason is that the nineteenth century was perfectly positioned *between* his main research interests. He had no personal stake in any of the major historiographical debates concerning the nineteenth century, and so, crucially, could offer a quasi-ethnographic view from the outside. He has continued to expand his focus since writing *The Transformation of the World*. He is now pursuing his interests in decolonization, global intellectual history, and classical music. Together with Akira Iriye, he is editor-in-chief of a six-volume *A History of the World*, published jointly since 2012 by Harvard University Press and C. H. Beck in Munich.⁶ In 2014, the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung (the German Academy for Language and Literature) awarded him its annual Sigmund Freud Preis für Wissenschaftliche Prosa for non-fiction literature.

The workshop sessions that followed focussed on three questions:

- a) “Does size matter?”, which explored the methodologies of global history.
- b) “Global history for whom?”, which addressed the thorny topics of politics and ideology.
- c) “Are we all global historians now?”, which speculated about the possible future directions that the field might take.

“Does Size Matter?”

The first session analysed the extent to which global history requires adjustments to “normal” historiographical methodologies and epistemologies. The focus of the discussion was an exchange of ideas on “How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History,” involving four historians from the United States—Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Kristin Mann, and Ann McGrath—published in the *American Historical Review* in December 2013.⁷ According to Osterhammel, this debate reflected the anxieties of historians in the face of big history, supported by digital humanities and big data. A case in point is the Big History Project, financially supported by Bill Gates.⁸ Should big history be regarded as a threat or an opportunity? Workshop participants pointed out that historians have always had the choice of taking either a horizontal or a vertical approach to their research topics, that is, to either cast their nets wide or drill deep. Moreover, it is essential to zoom in and out in order to construct a persuasive historical argument. As Jaap Jacobs, St. Andrews, noted, “seeing the world in a grain of sand” also belongs in the historian’s toolbox.

Jürgen Osterhammel addressed the problem by asking “the size of what?”, and considered four different categories:

Publications

In his 2012 interview with *Itinerario*, David Armitage mentioned the “crisis of the codex,” and seemed to dismiss big books as “dinosaurs,” preferring digital presentation or relatively slim volumes of at most 150,000 words instead.⁹ The standard length of articles published in scholarly journals is also getting shorter. Still, the robust sales of the recent global histories published by Osterhammel, Parker, and others suggest that the age of “dinosaurs” has not ended yet.

Geographical scope

Osterhammel contrasted the immediate cause of the First World War in July 1914 with the outbreak of “Spanish Flu” in January 1918. The July Crisis of 1914, which began with the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, involved only a few dozen people, all of them residing in European capital cities. The crisis would have immense global repercussions. The mutual misunderstandings and miscommunications of the handful of monarchs, statesmen, generals, and high-ranking civil servants would result in World War I—but nobody knew that at the time. By contrast, the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918–19 was perceived as a global event from the start.

Time spans

In Osterhammel’s view, not all global history has to conform to Fernand Braudel’s *longue durée*.¹⁰ The time spans covered by the Ph.D. candidates and postdoctoral

researchers working at the University of Konstanz range from six to sixty years, and this is probably the norm for historians—not just global historians—at many universities, largely because those who attempt to cover longer periods run out of funding.

Significance

Are we talking about “big events” versus “small events” here? How do we judge that? The crucial issue is the future potential of an event. For example, the German physicist Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (1845–1923) discovered X-rays in his laboratory in Würzburg on 8 November 1895. Two weeks later, he made the very first picture using X-rays (of the hand of his wife Anna Bertha). These were local events, but with enormous potential, and, after some time, a global impact.

Osterhammel confessed that he was not terribly interested in “deep history” (that is, the study of the distant past of the human species, stretching back 50,000 years or more), which he considers to be closely related to astrophysics and evolutionary biology. He gave two reasons for his scepticism:

- Deep history is apolitical, and does not even try to address the major political questions of the day, and
- deep history has no effective way of countering the claims of national histories—that is, histories of a far more limited timescale, which, contrary to Armitage’s optimistic claims in the 2012 *Itinerario* interview,¹¹ remain a popular format among historians and the reading public.

Osterhammel concluded that the question of size was of secondary importance. Ph.D. students must give very careful thought to the question of how they *manage* their global history projects. Conversely, for works of synthesis, selectivity—not “size”—is the essential issue, because syntheses, too, must be controlled. They have to be selective in various ways. John Darwin, author of *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400–2000*,¹² did not claim to be comprehensive. As a specialist on Eurasia and Africa, he paid little attention to Latin America or the Pacific, for example. This in no way invalidated his contribution to global historical analysis.

Perhaps to reassure the numerous graduate students and early-career scholars present, Parker insisted that a “big book” should rarely if ever be a historian’s first book. Such projects, he argued, take a lot of time and should be considered a career goal rather than a starting point. Nor did he consider the methodological issues raised by global history to be characteristic of that field alone. He identified five common problems:

1. the question of scales (*jeux d'échelles*), that is, the micro versus the macro problem
2. the question of explanation and causation (are there “laws” of history?)
3. the Braudelian issue of human agency versus structure
4. the comparison and analysis of connections and connectedness
5. the contested legitimacy of “grand narratives”

All historians must address these problems: they are not confined to those who wish to write global history. Parker also noted the problem of finding an appropriate chronology when writing global history. Does a timeframe that works for one region (say Europe) also make sense for other regions? Parker found good reason to begin his narrative of the seventeenth-century “crisis” in 1618, since that year saw not only the beginning of prolonged conflicts in both Europe and China, but also a sudden drop in global temperatures. However, it proved impossible to find a single date for the end of the crisis—although most afflicted states and societies began to recover at some point in the 1680s. He recalled a detailed discussion of this conundrum by participants in the “Special Forum: The Afterlife of Geoffrey Parker’s *Global Crisis*” held at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C., in January 2014.¹³ As for knowing how much detail to include, consider the July crisis of 1914. Despite hundreds of studies of how the Great Powers blundered into war, and thousands of surviving documents, only in 2012 did a historian manage to provide a definitive account of the process by which the British cabinet decided to declare war on Germany in the first days of August 1914.¹⁴ Once again, the challenges that face global historians face all historians.

The workshop discussion now turned to contingency. As Parker pointed out, when it comes to differentiating between “big events” and “small events,” the role of contingency must not be underestimated. The old-fashioned historiographical consensus that big events require big causes is now balanced by the realization that small events can have immense consequences as well. Parker cited the example of the Hungarian theoretical physicist Leo Szilard, who first visualized how to create a “nuclear chain reaction” when he observed how traffic lights changed from green through yellow to red while waiting to cross a London street in 1933. When Szilard filed a patent for his idea the following year, he specifically mentioned that, with it, “I can produce an explosion.” He was entirely correct. But it took eleven years, tens of thousands of co-workers, and billions of dollars to produce the “explosions” that would abruptly end World War II.¹⁵

Jim Livesey, founding director of the Scottish Centre for Global History at the University of Dundee,¹⁶ sounded a note of caution at this point. More people than just historians are engaged in global history, he noted, and not all of them share the historian’s approach to the past. Economists, for example, do not accept the rules of contingency. How do we distinguish global history from global economic history? Livesey suggested that global history should be considered a perspective on a topic— an approach, rather than a conceptual understanding.

The workshop then discussed different types of global or connected histories. Bernhard Struck, founding director of the Institute for Transnational and Spatial History at the University of St. Andrews,¹⁷ compared and contrasted transnational history and global history. In Struck’s view, the “transnational” operates at a lower level, on a continental rather than a global scale. Transnational history is the entangled history of nations and/or nation-states, such as, for example, Germany and Poland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Is it possible to trace the genealogies of global history in Britain? Workshop participants pointed out that the Warwick School prefers to focus on “connections”—usually between Europe or Africa and another region of the world—rather than “comparisons.” Certain examples of the “new international history” came in for criticism as being little more than twenty-first century repackaging of old-fashioned diplomatic history. However, workshop participants agreed that the fashion for global history had raised the bar for good practice in historical research. Parker suggested that the new “normal” in terms of epistemology requires a symmetrical approach: historians must always look at all parties to a problem, and at all the relevant sources. On any given research topic, they must become familiar with the existing literature in all relevant languages. One can no longer call oneself an “expert” on, let us say, Anglo-Dutch relations without examining sources and the secondary literature available in at least Dutch and English.

Guy Rowlands, St. Andrews, drew attention to the practical problem of access to sources, which he considered a particularly pressing one for global historians. Digitization of archives is usually seen as an important step forward in making primary sources available to (potential) users. Parker provided the example of Spain’s *Patrimonio Nacional*, which has already digitized fifty million documents from various archives, almost all of them available on-line. He can consult them (and if necessary print them) in his office in Columbus, Ohio, whether or not the archive itself is open.¹⁸ Other workshop participants provided more instances of valuable digitization projects, such as those undertaken by the Indonesian National Archives and Dutch National Archives.¹⁹ Yet Livesey noted that digitization is understood as appropriation by quite a few subaltern historians in the Caribbean—scholars who can read documents at home may cease to visit the region they study. Many European institutions are also unhappy at the prospect of putting entire collections online.

Parker then urged Ph.D. students to “muddy their boots” regardless, for two reasons. It is always better, he argued, to look in person at the places one studies, and not rely on, for example, Google maps. Visiting archives in person allows one to meet other scholars working on the same topic or a closely related one. Parker did not succeed in convincing the younger members of his audience—not initially, at least. They pointed to the growing importance of virtual forums, mailing lists, and dedicated social media platforms. Parker responded by emphasizing the importance of meeting local historians, who are not always active in such virtual forums and who can provide a local perspective that might be very different from one’s own. For example, while working on *Global Crisis* in 2002, Parker visited Shanghai and met a local historian to whom he explained his theory that climate change explained the collapse of Ming rule in Jiangnan (the lower Yangzi valley.) “Rubbish!” the local historian exclaimed. “The critical factor in causing the catastrophic famines of the mid-seventeenth century was the practice of partible inheritance, which created ever-diminishing landholdings per farmer.” Although Parker did not abandon his belief in the role of climate change, he gained important insights from this exchange of ideas, and he incorporated them into the argument of *Global Crisis*.

Osterhammel concluded this part of our discussions by noting the confusing state of the field of global history—although he stressed that this should be expected in a rapidly growing field. Could somebody step forward to map and categorize the vast amount of empirical work done in a global history? None present volunteered, but all considered Sebastian Conrad’s *What is Global History* (2016) at least a step in the right direction.²⁰

“Global History for Whom?”

The second session of the day explored the politics of global history, or, the question of whose interests are served by the study of global history. The starting point of our discussions was Conrad’s *What is Global History?* Whilst favourably impressed with the book’s intent, scope, and execution, many workshop participants also had serious reservations, especially about the author’s conclusions in chapter 10. In particular, Parker considered it rather naïve to suggest, as Conrad does, that “gone are the days when history departments could be content with a focus on one nation alone.”²¹ It certainly does not apply in most British universities. As Parker put it, just look at the preponderance of faculty who study “national history” in Oxford and in some Scottish universities! The research produced in these institutions may no longer be nationalistic, but it still has a national focus. Recent figures support Parker’s sceptical view. Peter Mandler, president of the Royal Historical Society, noted in his July 2016 letter to RHS members that “only 13% of historians in UK university departments study the non-Western world; the equivalent proportion in Canada is 20% and in the US 27%.”²²

Osterhammel did not share Conrad’s optimism either. He felt it was important to make two distinctions: a) between Europe-centred and Eurocentric approaches, and b) between national and nationalist history, which can, in fact, be easily camouflaged as world history. Chinese scholars often adopt a global perspective in order to reinforce the notion of Chinese primacy in world history. He questioned as over-optimistic David Armitage’s claim that “the hegemony of national historiography is over.”²³ Global historians and their reading public constitute an autonomous sphere of “circulation”—and not a very large one at that. He estimated that the reading public for European history in Germany exceeded that for global history by a factor of ten. For example, *1913: Der Sommer des Jahrhunderts* (2012), written by the German journalist Florian Illies and translated into English as *1913: The Year Before the Storm*, has sold 500,000 copies in Germany alone.²⁴ By contrast, it has become almost obligatory for German historians to situate their country’s history into transnational contexts. An early impetus in this direction came from the volume of collected essays, *Das Kaiserreich Transnational: Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914* (2006), edited by Conrad and Osterhammel.²⁵

Like most of the other workshop participants, Osterhammel endorsed the gloomy diagnosis of the late Christopher Bayly (1945–2015) that the prevalence of national—and often nationalist history—should not be underestimated.²⁶ The majority of

historians in the world today are not free to write what they want, but are expected to create the “useable pasts” demanded by ruling elites, often via a kind of national genealogy (“our country in world history”). A whole body of literature exists about states and societies allegedly locked in a kind of Darwinian competition with each other. Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000) can be considered the most elegant formulation of an argument of this kind.²⁷

Do historians still have a moral responsibility towards their readers, though? Put differently, when do they neglect that responsibility? In *What is Global History?*, Conrad asks whether “twenty-first century global history [is] not essentially a handmaiden of twenty-first century globalization.” His answer is that “one of the crucial tasks of global history is to offer a critical commentary on the ongoing globalization process.”²⁸ Parker begged to differ: historical writing, he suggested, tends to *mirror* developments in society but does not shape them—nor, for that matter, does it shape the future. Osterhammel argued that the days are gone when Western historians considered themselves answerable to collectives and abstractions such as the nation, a class, socialism, and so on. Perhaps global historians could be said to have a duty towards “the human species.” While acknowledging this as a noble ideal, Osterhammel did not consider it particularly helpful.

For many workshop participants, a thornier issue was that of language. Conrad criticizes the alleged hegemony of English as an academic language in the field of global history, and goes so far as to argue that “most global historians today continue to ignore scholarship written in other languages.”²⁹ Parker totally disagreed with Conrad’s contention. In his view, it is the *non-global* historians who “ignore scholarship written in other languages.” Thus Bernard S. Capp, a specialist on mid-seventeenth century England, wrote an excellent study entitled *Cromwell’s Navy* (1989) based on extensive research in English sources, but completely ignored the previous study of exactly the same subject by German scholar Hans-Christoph Junge, published nine years earlier. Similarly, in his monograph *The King’s Living Image* (2004), about the mediation and delegation of royal power in the early modern Hispanic world, Alejandro Cañeque made no reference to a study in German published by Regine Jorzick six years earlier on much the same subject that cited many of the same sources.³⁰ Parker quoted John Richards, another pioneer of “Big History”, who in *The Unending Frontier* (2003) observed that “in the best of all worlds, the author would be proficient in a half-dozen more languages.”³¹ He also pointed out that, if necessary, one can “pay to play” in order to follow Richards’ advice: find someone who can translate or summarize a text, be it a primary or secondary source, written in a language one cannot read.

Workshop participants argued that there was nevertheless an issue with English as *the lingua franca* of global history. It is a factor that contributes to the worldwide dominance of Anglo-American scholarship. In communicating with readers, non-native speakers of English are at a disadvantage when they cannot articulate their research quite as well or quite as appealingly as native speakers of English can.

True proficiency in a language exceeds the level required for a basic comprehension of primary sources, and involves a thorough appreciation of metaphor, usage, and historic linguistic change. That, of course, was also true when French and, before that, Latin and Italian had been the mediums of intellectual exchange in the Western world. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

The third and final discussion centred on the mantras of connectivity and mobility in the field of global history. Conrad is quite critical of this development: “The concern with globality and globalization has led many historians to privilege interactions and transfers, and to treat them as ends in themselves. Connectedness then becomes the only language that the sources seem to speak, as if this was their deep and true meaning.”³²

Parker interpreted this as a critique of Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s article on “Connected Histories” (1997) and of recent work by Subrahmanyam and others on global microhistory.³³ Osterhammel disagreed, however. He considered it a swipe at anthropologists, who tend to use images of water and fluidity when referring to movement, thus misrepresenting processes that, in reality, are subject to many barriers and complications. Moreover, such a choice of metaphors ignores the salient question of global inequalities. For who is being moved? Who is doing the trading and shipping? As Osterhammel pointed out, networks do not always result in communities and certainly not in communities of equals: think of patronage networks, for example. In his view, sociological network theory offers several well-established ways to prevent such misconceptions.³⁴

Staying with the topic of mobility and connectivity, workshop participants discussed the extent to which immobile communities were nevertheless affected by mobility—through the increased availability of consumer goods or information, for example. Jaap Jacobs brought up the “globalization of the mind”: a drip, drip, drip of tales told by people who had come into contact with individuals or groups living elsewhere on the planet. Livesey suggested that it might be more helpful to investigate whether there was a shared repertoire of behaviour as a consequence of increased global connections. Analogous to the “repertoire of empire” which Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper discussed in *Empires in World History*, one might re-conceptualize connectivity and mobility as being part of “repertoires of innovation,” available to different individuals or groups at different times. Parker considered this an attractive option for historians. Rulers of empires such as Philip II of Spain had a limited repertoire of military and administrative know-how at their disposal. There were limits to what they could do. In sixteenth-century Europe, although letters travelled faster than any other man-made item, they never travelled faster than one hundred miles a day, for example, limiting the ability of even the most powerful rulers to influence events, let alone control them. Although in theory rulers could learn new tricks, they did not always do so (as Parker shows in his *Grand Strategy of Philip II*).³⁵

This brought us to the topic of microhistory and historical biography. In an age of global history, does it make sense to write about individual, perhaps totally unexceptional human beings? Most workshop participants shared a belief in the power of

human agency and in the unique opportunities offered by individual stories to reveal wider pictures, and they concluded that biography and microhistory would continue to be valuable historiographical genres.³⁶ Of course, many open questions remain regarding the way global history can or should be written. Attacks on the methodology of an emerging field are nothing new either. Recent dismissals of global microhistory reminded Parker of the criticism which John Elliott had levied at Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980) in *The New York Review of Books*.³⁷ Elliott wondered "how many Menocchios" there had actually been in European history, and whether their stories were worth telling. He made a similar point in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford in 1991, remarking that "there is surely something amiss when the name of Martin Guerre becomes as well or better known than that of Martin Luther."³⁸ In 2014, Natalie Zemon Davis, author of *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1984), responded to Elliott's criticism. In the journal *Common Knowledge*, she argued that both the Protestant Reformer and the obscure French peasant

are part of the same universe of historical inquiry. Knowing about Martin Guerre brings understanding of the peasant world, which is also important for the trajectory of Luther's Reformation. Knowing about Martin Luther brings knowledge of major religious change, essential to understanding Martin Guerre's village world and what happened in it. Themes of "imposture" and "dissimulation" and the fashioning of identity are central to social conflicts and social and personal aspiration across the spectrum in the sixteenth century: they are found in the actual lives of both men and in Martin Luther's sermons, as well as in the Martin Guerre trial.³⁹

This took Parker back to the question of what is "good" and "bad" global history. Which criteria do we use for inclusion and exclusion? Where does one stop? As always, there are more questions than answers!

Conclusions: Are We All Global Historians Now?

A concluding session allowed participants to exchange their experience of actually writing (global) history. Do you use index-cards? Do you work from generals to particulars? What are the advantages of single and joint authorship? At the request of various workshop participants, both Osterhammel and Parker offered some insights into the making of their respective global histories.

Geoffrey Parker began.⁴⁰ In 1976, he listened to a BBC broadcast featuring the American solar physicist John A. Eddy,⁴¹ who suggested that there might have been a causal link between the so-called "Maunder Minimum" in the number of sunspots and the so-called "Little Ice Age" in the seventeenth century. Eddy speculated that the prolonged absence of sunspots had resulted in global cooling. Average temperatures in seventeenth-century Europe had been a degree centigrade lower than normal. Eddy's research was perhaps the first application of solar physics to early modern history. Parker, who had long suspected that there was something missing in the *Past & Present* debate about "The General Crisis,"⁴² immediately got in touch with the

American solar physicist, who gave permission to include his essay in *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (1978), a collection co-edited by Parker and a former student, Lesley Smith.⁴³

Then, in February 1998, shortly after completing a revised edition of that collection, Parker awoke from a dream convinced that he should move beyond a volume of essays and write “an integrated narrative and analytical account of the first global crisis for which we possess adequate documentation for Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe.” Penguin and Basic Books gave him a book contract for “The World Crisis, 1635–1665,” to be delivered in 2003. Parker soon discovered that the project was far more complicated than first expected. The study’s proposed start and end dates had to be extended back to 1618 and forward to the 1680s. More important, his decision to combine material from the “natural archive” of the period (climatic proxy data such as tree-ring size, precipitation records, and glacier advances) with data from the “human archive” (chronicles, letters, “weather diaries”, art, and archaeology) resulted in a 1,500-page typescript, submitted four years late, in 2007. After six months of total silence, Parker’s editor at Basic Books curtly rejected the work as “too long and too late.” Parker’s editor at Penguin, by contrast, first lost the typescript, then reconstituted it from electronic files in the wrong order, and finally criticized him for writing a typescript that did not “flow”—responses which, to put it mildly, did not motivate him to pursue the project any further.

With the benefit of hindsight, Parker eventually realized that the double rejection had been a blessing in disguise. By the time he regained his enthusiasm for the project, far more material from both the natural and the human archive had become available, while the contemporary debate over the impact of climate change had intensified. In 2010, he signed a new contract with Yale University Press. The typescript was cut by more than one-third by three ruthless graduate students from Ohio State University—Sandy Bolzenius and Kate Epstein from the U.S., and Mircea Platon from Romania—and an equally ruthless visiting scholar from Australia, Rayne Allinson. At the same time, they unearthed much new material that strengthened his argument, while Kate Epstein forced him to abandon his original title. First, she noted that “The World Crisis” had been used by Winston Churchill as the title of his history of World War I. When Parker hesitated, she reminded him that A. J. Balfour had waspishly dismissed that work as “Winston’s brilliant Autobiography, disguised as a history of the universe.” Parker duly changed his own title to *Global Crisis*.⁴⁴

How does one select and present a representative selection of material that tells a truly global story? Parker explained that his friend Robert C. Cowley, a historian with extensive editorial experience, had advised him to enliven the text of *Global Crisis* by including at least one “Gee-whiz” fact per page, in order to keep the reader engaged. He sought to follow this advice by identifying one contemporary source for each of the regions afflicted by the “fatal synergy” between natural and man-made disasters. For example, the Swede Karl Anders Pommerenning was the only resident foreign diplomat in Russia during the traumatic upheavals of 1648–49, but he

described and analysed those upheavals in his dispatches for the benefit of his home government. He also sent home copies of documents, mostly of originals now lost. Enomoto Yazaemon, a salt merchant living northwest of Tokyo (Edo), left an autobiography that included a vivid record of the extreme weather experienced during the 1640s. Both sources were suggested to Parker by specialists in (respectively) Russian and Japanese history, and he obtained English translations which he quoted extensively in his book.⁴⁵

Parker secured a sabbatical leave for the academic year 2011–12, and spent it implementing the many helpful suggestions of his ruthless editorial quartet, as well as those supplied by other experts in areas where his own knowledge was weak. In May 2012, he sent Yale University Press the revised typescript, a tight 1,200-pages, reflecting the research and reading undertaken over the thirty-six years since he had heard the radio interview with Jack Eddy. *The Global Crisis* appeared in both Britain and the United States in spring 2013; in December, *The Sunday Times* of London proclaimed it “The History Book of the Year;” and in 2014, it won a “British Academy Medal,” awarded for a “landmark academic achievement in any of the disciplines supported by the Academy, which has transformed understanding of a particular subject or field of study.” The book may still be “too long,” Parker reflected, but it may not, after all, be “too late.”

Jürgen Osterhammel then discussed his own magnum opus, *The Transformation of the World*. This was a product of the sabbatical year spent at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in 2001–2002. Osterhammel had gone to NIAS with the intention of writing a comparative study of European overseas empires in the nineteenth century. However, upon arrival at NIAS, it turned out that Henk Wesseling, the institute’s director, had just submitted his own book on the topic to the publishers. What was to be done? Osterhammel felt that he had two options: either write a research monograph or “hazard a *Flucht nach vorn* [to take the bull by the horns] and attempt something even grander,” meaning a comprehensive portrait of an age, of which empires would just be one facet. He opted for the latter. He spent his time at NIAS drawing up various outlines for the book, both in terms of contents and argument. His conversations with Peer Vries—soon to move to the University of Vienna, but a resident fellow at NIAS at the time—were crucial in this respect.⁴⁶ Following the publication in 2004 of Chris Bayly’s masterpiece *The Birth of the Modern World*,⁴⁷ Osterhammel again shelved his own, very similar project for a while. When he overcame the “Bayly shock,” as he calls it, he managed to write the bulk of the manuscript in 2006 and 2007. A sabbatical year in Munich sponsored by the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation made it possible for him to complete the book.⁴⁸

Discussing the place of his book in the field, Osterhammel started out by noting that even generalists are specialists most of the time—beware of full-time generalists! There are many different styles of doing global history, most of which he considered legitimate. Following Isaiah Berlin, he distinguished between what he called “the fox approach to history,” which concentrates on one big problem, such as Pomeranz’s

The Great Divergence and the entire debate about Western exceptionalism, and what he called “the hedgehog approach to history,” which deals with many small problems. The writing of syntheses is, in quantitative terms, a very marginal genre. As J. R. McNeill noted in his book review, *The Transformation of the World* is not exactly a textbook written for undergraduate students, but rather a collection of analyses aimed at professional historians.⁴⁹ Osterhammel quoted the Qing dynasty philosopher Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801): “Literary skill, learning, and insight—to possess any of these is not an easy task, but to be equally proficient in all three is even more difficult.”⁵⁰

When asked, Osterhammel found it difficult to compare the historical interpretations offered by *The Transformation of the World* and *Global Crisis*. It was far easier and more appropriate to do that for *The Transformation of the World* and, for example, Bayly’s *The Birth of the Modern World*. In his review, McNeill agreed that *The Transformation of the World* and *The Birth of the Modern World* were “kindred spirits.” However, McNeill also saw important differences. In his view, “Bayly’s is more tightly focused, less sprawling, less abstract, less influenced by the traditions of German historical sociology, which Osterhammel finds especially useful in his discussions of the state and of social hierarchy.”⁵¹ Osterhammel was glad to hear from people close to Bayly that the author of *The Birth of the Modern World* did not believe such differences precluded useful comparisons between the two books. Carla Pestana notes in her contribution to the American Historical Association’s special forum on *Global Crisis* that Parker and Osterhammel have “a somewhat similar approach to writing history on a grand scale.”⁵² A case in point is the attention paid by both authors to time and chronology.⁵³ In Osterhammel’s view, both *Global Crisis* and *The Transformation of the World* can be characterized as global portraits of a defined time-period. Like most works of historical scholarship, both books speak to the present as well as the past. In the twenty-first century, human populations around the world are unevenly affected by globalization and man-made climate change. There are notable differences, of course. According to Osterhammel, Parker successfully combines the “fox” and “hedgehog” approaches to history, making *Global Crisis* a much more thesis-driven work than *The Transformation of the World*. Another striking difference is the ingenious use of primary sources in *Global Crisis*. Apparently, the editor removed all quotations from *The Transformation of the World*, on the grounds that an even longer book would never see the light of the day.

As noted earlier, *The Transformation of the World* is based entirely on secondary literature—as many or even most syntheses of comparable scope tend to be. Osterhammel emphasized the pleasure of reading first-rate monographic work. Why should specialists only find a response among small circles of their fellow-experts? Even so, workshop participants asked, how had he selected his materials for a global history of a “long” century (c. 1760 to 1920) and succeeded in covering almost all major aspects of the past, from politics to religion? Osterhammel replied that relying on the secondary literature is actually a boon. It provides a coherence that a highly

selective employment of primary materials could not possibly guarantee. Too many topics would have to be left untouched.

Finally, the workshop participants gave some thought to the possible futures of global history. Jürgen Osterhammel saw the need to integrate global and international history. Currently, many “global historians” ignore the fundamental conditions of war and peace. “Environmental studies” is another promising avenue of research, of great relevance to the modern world. Parker praised Braudel’s “problematic imperative”: “The framework of research is *the problem*, selected with full independence and responsibility of mind, beyond all those plans, so comfortable and so tempting, that carry with them as an extra dividend, the warranty and blessing of the University.”⁵⁴ And what problem could be more “imperative” than environmental studies? Yet global history, Parker claimed, to murmurs of agreement, faces a tenacious and powerful enemy: the increasing imposition of metrics to evaluate research, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in Great Britain. This, he asserted, would have prevented Braudel from completing either of his two masterpieces—*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, and *Civilization and Capitalism*—because each took decades to complete.⁵⁵ Despite this gloomy prediction, the junior scholars and graduate students present seemed undeterred. The workshop itself was an illustration of the breadth, relevance, and appeal of global history today. On that cheerful note, the workshop participants relocated to the Dundee Contemporary Arts Centre for drinks, dinner, and convivial conversation.

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Notes

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- 1 Interviews with both Geoffrey Parker and Jürgen Osterhammel have appeared in *Itinerario*: Roozenbeek, de Jong, Blussé, et al., “‘I End Up with the Question ‘Why’””; and Weber and Gommans, “‘You Turn a Page’.”
 - 2 For more on Parker’s historical roots, see his essay “‘A Man’s Gotta Know His Limitations’.”
 - 3 Barraclough, *The Times Atlas of World History*. In 1993, Parker himself edited the third edition of the *Atlas*, and in 1995 also *The Times Compact Atlas of World History*. Parker’s other books include *The Dutch Revolt; Europe in Crisis, 1598–1648; The Spanish Armada; The Military Revolution; The Grand Strategy of Philip II; and Imprudent King*. All have been translated into Spanish, and most into Dutch and other languages.
 - 4 Osterhammel, *Britischer Imperialismus im Fernen Osten*.
 - 5 See, for example, Kocka, *Capitalism: A Short History*.
 - 6 Jansen and Osterhammel, *Dekolonisation: Das Ende der Imperien*. English translation, *Decolonization: A Short History*, forthcoming. Three volumes of the *History of the World* series have appeared so far in English: Reinhard, ed., *Empires and Encounters, 1350–1750*; Rosenberg, ed., *A World Connecting: 1870–1945*; and Iriye, ed., *Global Interdependence: The World after 1945*. A fourth volume on the period c. 1750–1870 is so far only available in German (2016). The American version will be published in 2017.
 - 7 Aslanian, et al., “How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History.”
 - 8 <https://school.bighistoryproject.com/bhplive>.
 - 9 Ittersum and Jacobs, “Are We All Global Historians Now?”
 - 10 See, for example, Braudel and Coll, “Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée.”
 - 11 Van Ittersum and Jacobs, “Are We All Global Historians Now?”
 - 12 Darwin, *After Tamerlane*.
 - 13 Parker et al., “Special Forum: The Afterlife of Geoffrey Parker’s Global Crisis.”
 - 14 Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, chapter 5.
 - 15 Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, chapter 1 and p. 214.
 - 16 See <https://globalhistory.org.uk>.
 - 17 See <http://standrewstransnational.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>.
 - 18 See the Portal de Archivos Españoles (PARES), <http://en.www.mcu.es/archivos/CE/PARES.html>.
 - 19 See the Indonesian National Archives <https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/>, and the Dutch National Archives: <http://www.gahetna.nl/>.
 - 20 Conrad, *What is Global History?*
 - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 206.
 - 22 Peter Mandler, “RHS Letter Regarding the EU Referendum” (12 July 2016), available at <http://royalhistsoc.org/rhs-letter-regarding-eu-referendum/>. In his

- letter, Mandler cites the figures produced by Clossey and Guyatt in their article "It's a Small World After All."
- 23 Van Ittersum and Jacobs, "Are We All Global Historians Now?" 16.
- 24 Illies, *1913: Der Sommer des Jahrhunderts*.
- 25 Conrad and Osterhammel, *Das Kaiserreich Transnational*.
- 26 Bayly, "History and World History." For an obituary, see Drayton, "Sir Christopher Bayly."
- 27 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.
- 28 Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 210–212.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 219.
- 30 Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*; Junge, *Flottenpolitik und Revolution*; Cañeque, *The King's Living Image*; and Jorzick, *Herrschaftssymbolik und Staat*.
- 31 Richards, *The Unending Frontier*, 3.
- 32 Conrad, *What Is Global History*, 224. On p. 226, Conrad also critiques global history's alleged "obsession" with mobility and movement.
- 33 Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories." Cf. Ghobrial, "The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon."
- 34 For a recent overview of different historiographical approaches to network theory, see Innes, "'Networks' in British History."
- 35 Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*.
- 36 Ghobrial, "The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon" is not only a prime example of 'global microhistory', but it also raises some of the connectivity issues addressed above.
- 37 Elliott, "Rats or Cheese?"
- 38 Elliott, *National and Comparative History*.
- 39 Davis, "Martin Luther"; and Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.
- 40 See also Parker, "The Genesis of *Global Crisis*."
- 41 For Jack Eddy's reflections on the public impact of his work, particularly among historians, see "Interview with Jack Eddy." The debate on the connection between the absence of dark sun spots and the "Little Ice Age" of the seventeenth century is far from over. See, for example, Schilling, "Did Quiet Sun Cause Little Ice Age After All?"
- 42 See Hobsbawm, "The General Crisis of the European Economy"; Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the 17th Century"; Kossmann, "Discussion of H. R. Trevor-Roper"; Hobsbawm, "Discussion of H. R. Trevor-Roper"; Hexter, "Discussion of H. R. Trevor-Roper"; Mousnier, "Discussion of H. R. Trevor-Roper"; and Elliott, "Discussion of H. R. Trevor-Roper."
- 43 Parker and Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*.
- 44 Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 5 vols.; and Egremont, *Balfour*. Winston Churchill served as Liberal MP for Dundee in the period 1908–22.
- 45 The colleagues were Paul Bushkovitch (Yale) and Ronald P. Toby (Illinois.) By chance, since completing *Global Crisis*, articles about both Pommerenning and Enomoto have appeared: Romaniello, "Moscow's Lost Petition" and Roberts, "Name and Honor."
- 46 Weber and Gommans, "'You Turn a Page'", 14.
- 47 Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*.
- 48 Weber and Gommans, "'You Turn a Page,'" 15.
- 49 Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*; and McNeill, review of Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*.
- 50 Zhang Xuecheng, *On Ethics and History*, 16.
- 51 McNeill, review of Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, 1440–41 (quotations on p. 1441). See also Osterhammel, "Global History and Historical Sociology."
- 52 Pestana, "The Afterlife of *Global Crisis*", n10.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 54 Quoted and contextualized in the wickedly perceptive article by Hexter, "Fernand Braudel and the *Monde Braudellien*."
- 55 Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen*; and Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*.