

Global History in a National Context: The Case of Germany

Abstract: The article distinguishes between various forms of macro-history. It analyses their respective representation in German historical scholarship during the twentieth century, with special emphasis on recent decades. Reasons for the prevalence of certain historiographical traditions over others and for the comparative weakness of world history and global history in contemporary Germany are being discussed. The article concludes with a brief sketch of several ongoing debates.

Key Words: history of historiography, philosophy of history, transnational history, world history, twentieth-century Germany

Global historians do not form a separate species. In their daily professional lives they do not differ dramatically from their colleagues working in fields that are more narrowly circumscribed. While global history appeals to audiences in more than one country, and, ideally, in more than one linguistic area, while its supporting networks are more extensive and more cosmopolitan than those of national or micro-regional history, it remains rooted in individual academic cultures. Therefore, global historians inhabit overlapping worlds of scholarship and communication. They speak to the world, but most of them continue to work in contexts where they share the mundane problems of teaching, surviving or shaping academic administration and addressing all sorts of publics, many of them of a distinctly national character. This is not to be deplored. A global history existing exclusively within a sphere of disembodied supra-nationality would isolate itself from natural communities of discourse. The global historian rarely escapes from some sort of national identification, if only a highly attenuated one. Even if he or she does not

deliberately adopt and cultivate a national point of view, certain institutional and communicative constraints stand in the way of an uncontaminated globalism.

All this may be least true for global historians writing in English. But even they, who can count on being understood all over the world, sometimes betray a specific colouring of their concerns and their writing. British styles of global and world history are not completely identical with approaches from the United States. Australian, Indian or South African historians, even if they deny any interest in national history, cannot always obliterate their national historical experience and a hidden national agenda. If global history is being written in Chinese, Japanese or Arabic, in Russian, French or German, its authors' principal concern is the public at home. Even those who do not place themselves within older national traditions of world history writing, are compelled to engage a domestic audience that expects global issues being framed in terms of their relevance for the present and future of the home society.

The present paper elaborates and illustrates this claim for the case of Germany – no longer the main site of the production of world historical knowledge, but still one of those countries where strong efforts are being made to keep abreast of recent historiographical developments.¹ Side-glances at Austria and (germano-phone) Switzerland round off the picture. The following explanations are based on the assumption that work published in German is not readily accessible to a vast majority of scholars working in (or interested in) the field of global historical studies. Beyond this mundane and highly pragmatic consideration, it is not obvious to treat German contributions to global history as a distinct, independent and clearly demarcated discourse. Some of the best work by German historians is now published in English, and it is extremely difficult, and ultimately futile, to look for traces of its “Germanness”. A growing number of these historians, especially among the younger generation, have migrated to universities in the United States, Great Britain, Japan or to such extraterritorial and cosmopolitan academic locations as the European University Institute at Florence. They carry with them their German training without self-consciously transplanting any characteristically German tradition.² The reasons for this recent brain drain are manifold: a bottleneck in career patterns making it difficult to obtain tenured positions in German academia, a decline of the average professorial remuneration at state universities since the introduction of a new salary scale a few years ago and a higher teaching load than elsewhere in the Western world. “Transnational” careers of this kind, still few in number, point to an increasing globality of the practice of global history. The historian of historiography, however, has the task to report on the past.³

It should be added that my own work as far as it relates to global and world history has never been self-consciously German. Earlier monographs on British

imperialism and Chinese nationalism during the Nanjing period (1927–1937), on China's position in the world since the eighteenth century and on Asia in European thought between 1680 und 1830, complemented by shorter books on the Chinese revolution, on colonialism and on the history of globalization,⁴ led to an attempt to write a world history of the nineteenth century that was published in 2009.⁵ The systematic foundations for that project were laid in a collection of articles on the theory and history of historiography.⁶ Since these books were mostly written within the context of German history departments and published with German publishing houses, they inhabit an intellectual space confined by the limits of a scholarly and literary idiom that continues to lose ground in international communication. My personal views are not representative of world/global history in Germany, and the present paper is not written from within the “field” (if there is one: we shall see), but rather from the point of view of a semi-detached observer who has been active since the early 1980s in promoting transnational and global approaches of various kinds, who has some additional research experience in the history of Republican China, but who teaches conventional courses in late modern European history and in the history of international relations. My approach to world history is eclectic. In historiographical *practice* it aims at a combination of aspects and approaches that should probably be kept apart in *theoretical* terms.⁷

Varieties of Macrohistory

In a carefully crafted manual on world history writing like the one by Patrick Manning one finds discussions of and hints at a great number of dead German (or Swiss or Austrian) classics – in Manning's case: Jacob Burckhardt, Wilhelm Dilthey, Norbert Elias, Sigmund Freud, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Johann Gottfried Herder, Karl Jaspers, Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler, Alfred Weber and Max Weber –, but not one single reference to a living author from the German-speaking countries.⁸ The only contemporary German theorist sometimes mentioned in world history literature, if not by Manning, is the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, definitely not a global historian, with his venerable concept of the “public sphere”, introduced in 1962.⁹ What happened to the German Great Tradition of world history?

First, let us look at the current bibliographical situation. The term *Globalgeschichte* (global history) is not yet well-established in German scholarly literature. In early February 2009, the catalogue of the German National Library (Deutsche Nationalbibliothek) recorded 12 books with ‘Globalgeschichte’ in their title, one of them a translation of Christopher Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World*.¹⁰ The earliest of the references dates from 1994: a special issue of the journal *Comparativ*,

edited in Leipzig.¹¹ Most of the eleven books originally written in German form part of two semi-popular series of collections of chapters and articles published in Vienna.¹² The most ambitious publication to date is of recent origin.¹³ The only monograph carrying *Globalgeschichte* in its title remains the translation of Bayly's famous work. Another terminological innovation, *Transnationale Geschichte*, made its first German appearance, at least on a title page, as late as 2006.¹⁴ By early 2009, no other book had adopted that term, though it has become quite popular with the authors of articles. Things are, of course, vastly different as far as the old term *Weltgeschichte* is concerned. Here the catalogue of any large research library will yield 2,000 items or more, the earliest ones dating from the eighteenth century.

In Germany, as elsewhere, terminological confusion surrounds the various concepts related to history in a non-national mould and in the long run – “macrohistory” as it might be called.¹⁵ For the practical purposes of the present paper, I suggest a number of simple definitions, disregarding the fact that each of my solutions would be hotly contested by other German historians. While these proposals do not express a consensus among German historians, they are meant to instil a measure of precision into the subsequent remarks.¹⁶

Universal History is the construction of goal-oriented, teleological (nothing wrong with this on principal grounds) narratives pertaining to mankind in its entirety. It is based on the conviction that behind the material surface of history the unfolding of “meaning” (*Sinn der Geschichte*) in recognizable shapes (stages, long waves, etc.) can be discerned by the philosophically-minded historian or sociologist.

World History is a de-centred, and certainly non-eurocentric, perspective, detached, as far as possible, from the concrete circumstances and the national identity of the observer, on the varieties of social and cultural life across time and space, focussing on distinct features of macro-units such as “civilizations”, “empires” or “nation-states”, on identities within such units, on special paths and trajectories and on particular ways of problem-solving in response to ecological and economic challenges. World History considers interaction between peoples, but does not privilege it at the expense of internal developments. It only deserves its name when it is more than a mere addition of regional histories. In other words: World History is meaningless without some kind of comparative approach.

Transnational History is the history of movements of human beings, knowledge and objects transgressing the limits of social units that define their identity through political order and/or ethnic solidarity. These movements need not be of planetary scope and do not necessarily have to cross “civilizational” boundaries. They often lead to complex “entanglements” between neighbouring societies. Transnational history, narrowly defined, presupposes the historical emergence of the nation-state.

The term should therefore be applied to pre-modern periods only with a certain degree of caution.

Global History Mark 1 (in a narrow sense) is the history of the continuous, but not linear intensification of interactions across vast spaces and of the crystallization of these interactions into extended networks or, sometimes, institutions which usually possess their own hierarchical structure. The tension between the global and the local is crucial for this approach. It makes little use of the concept of “civilizations” and considers places and regions as the nodal points from which networks are being constructed.

What all these modes of historical thinking have in common is that they contribute to “history beyond the nation-state” (“Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats”),¹⁷ put differently, to “a project to reconstruct aspects of the human past that transcend any one nation-state, empire, or other politically defined territory”.¹⁸ This project does not render national history obsolete and refuses to deny its legitimacy, but it underscores the historicity and contingency of nation and nation-state. It rests upon a critique of euro-centrism and grants equal “agency” to all inhabitants of the planet without ignoring the preponderance of “the West” in shaping the “modern” world. We might also call it Global History Mark 2, that is, Global History in a wider sense. In terms of the other definitions given above, it encompasses Global History Mark 1, Transnational History and comparative World History, but excludes Universal History and also World History in its manifestation as a Spenglerian history of individual and unconnected “cultural arenas” (*Kulturkreise*).

Paths towards World History/Global History

Global historians Mark 2 in a German context can loosely and liberally be defined as people who do not exclusively work within a framework of national history (*any* national history: not just German history, but also French, Mexican or Japanese history) and who *also* display a certain interest, based upon some amount of reading of specialist literature, in the history of a continent other than “one’s own”, i.e. a historian of Europe should be roughly familiar with China or Africa and a historian specializing in Vietnam or the Caribbean should know something about Europe.

Prior to the current generation of Ph.D. candidates (if only at a small number of universities), nobody in Germany ever had a chance of being *trained* from the outset in the study of global phenomena. There were no “global studies” and hardly any university courses in *Weltgeschichte*. Today’s better-known world historians arrived at their position by a variety of different paths and from widely diverging starting-points:

1. ... from the study of European expansion, imperialism, colonialism (in a general way, not just one particular target area): Wolfgang J. Mommsen (1930–2004), Dietmar Rothermund (b. 1930), Wolfgang Reinhard (b. 1937), Reinhard Wendt (b. 1949), Jürgen Osterhammel (b. 1952), et al.;
2. ... from a concern with historiography or with theoretical concepts of globality: Ernst Schulin (b. 1929), Gottfried Schramm (b. 1929), Hans-Heinrich Nolte (b. 1938, the foremost German representative of world-system theory and editor of the *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte*, 2000–), Matthias Middell (b. 1961), et al.;
3. ... from the history of migration: Klaus-Jürgen Bade (b. 1944), Dirk Hoerder (b. 1943, who has been writing in English for a long time);
4. ... from the history of international relations or from global economic history: a general option, but no German representative who would be comparable to Paul Bairoch or Patrick O'Brien;
5. ... from a generalized concern with (cross-cultural) comparison: Michael Mitterauer (b. 1937), Jürgen Kocka (b. 1941), Sebastian Conrad (b. 1966) et al.;
6. ... from an area specialization within Non-western history: Andreas Eckert (Africa), Ulrike Freitag or Birgit Schaebler (Middle East), Harald Fischer-Tiné (India), Marc Frey (Southeast Asia), Wolfgang Schwentker (Japan) and several others – most of them born after 1960.

Path (6) has been by far the most important avenue towards Global History Mark 2 in the German-speaking countries. While very few historians of Europe have extended their reach to encompass the rest of the world, historians of Asia, Africa and Latin America are now, in quantitative as well as in qualitative terms, the most important practitioners of Global History. North American history is a special case apart. Few members of this field, strongly preoccupied as they are with transatlantic relations, have felt a need to branch out globally. For a long time marginalized within the profession as representatives of *Außereuropäische Geschichte* (Non-European History), historians of Asia, Africa, Latin America and (very few) of the Pacific have been able to use the semantics of global history to enhance their standing and present themselves as proponents of one of the most advanced tendencies in international historiography. This has not been their principal motive, but it is making life easier for a small academic minority.

The map of global historical studies in Germany is easy to draw. Apart from Leipzig, all the other major nuclei of global history in Germany have grown out of historical area studies. A basic institutional requirement for the emergence of a local nucleus seems to be that a history department possesses more than one senior/tenured professorship in non-western or even non-European history. This is only the case at a handful of universities, among them two foundations of recent origin: the private Jacobs University at Bremen with professors specializing in China and

Southeast Asia, and the University of Erfurt, re-established in 1994 with chairs for North American, West Asian und East Asian history. Some of the largest and most prestigious departments of history in Germany have *no* Asian, African or Latin American capacities in research and teaching: Munich, Tübingen, Bonn, Frankfurt am Main, etc. Only *one* senior professor among the twenty or so at the famous history department of Bielefeld University is an expert on history outside Europe (in this case: Latin America), a similar situation obtains at the large history department in Münster where Asia and Africa are not represented. At some places there is a close cooperation between “general” (i.e. European) historians and colleagues working as historians in departments other than History: Middle Eastern Studies (*Islamwissenschaften*), East Asian studies, etc. Such cooperation, however, depends entirely on personal constellations. In most cases, it lacks a firm institutional basis, and it is hardly ever less than fragile. Different methodological traditions are likely to render joint initiatives difficult. German “oriental studies” (in general) put a high premium on linguistic and philological training and expertise and often do not provide adequate instruction in the techniques and ways of thinking characteristic of historical research.¹⁹

All this means that only very few German universities possess the necessary institutional foundations for World History and Global History: Berlin (both Freie Universität and Humboldt Universität) with its broad range of non-European competence, and Leipzig, where Matthias Middell has established himself a leading methodologist of macrohistory and the most successful organizer of Global History events,²⁰ are the dominating centres with Hamburg (though a shadow of its former greatness), Bremen (Jacobs University, with English as its language of instruction) and Heidelberg with its South Asia tradition trailing behind. In Austria, Vienna is rising to rival Berlin as a locus for global history with world-wide influence. Everywhere else, global history can only be the result of personal preferences of individual scholars whose main task is to teach something else, for example Jörg Fisch at Zurich (before that university added Africa and Southeast Asia to its choice of regions) or myself at Konstanz. Under such circumstances, special courses, i.e. Master programmes, in Global History are difficult to establish.

It is possible to distinguish between several generations in post-1945 German (especially West German) historiography.

(1) In the 1950s and 1960s, a small, but visible minority of historians were interested in World History, often crossing disciplinary borders. To mention just a few: the great historian of ancient Rome, Alfred Heuss (1909–1995, Göttingen), the medievalist August Nitschke (b. 1926, Stuttgart), or Herbert Franke (b. 1914, Munich), a world-authority on Yuan and Song China. Many among this group contributed to the multi-volume *Propyläen Weltgeschichte* (1960–63, named after a

publishing house), a major editorial achievement at the time. Some of them were also attached to the quarterly journal *Saeculum. Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte* (1950–), a “yearbook” whose subtitle, according to my definitions, should be translated as World History rather than Universal History. It still exists today, perhaps a bit remote from current theoretical concerns, but not at all outdated, and edited with circumspection and imagination by the Ancient historian Jochen Martin (b. 1936) and the Indologist Heinrich von Stietencron (b. 1933). The scholars who publish in *Saeculum* do not form a compact school. Many of them, however, share an interest in “historical anthropology”, considered not as a retrospective application of social or cultural anthropology (or ethnology), but as the study of elementary aspects of the *conditio humana* across civilizations.²¹ A new generation is now following in the footsteps of the founders and is gaining influence in the “Institute of Historical Anthropology”, a kind of network based at Freiburg i.Br. and currently headed by the early modernist Peter Burschel (b. 1963, Rostock).

(2) In the 1970s, and carried over into the 1980s, a massive turn towards social history, or rather Historical Social Science, raised the general level of theoretical sophistication in (West) German historical scholarship, while narrowing the geographical focus to the problems of industrial society. With the exception of the United States, non-European parts of the world did not catch the attention of this influential school which was strongly identified with the University of Bielefeld. The flagship journal of this group, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (“History and Society”, 1975–), contained almost no articles on non-European topics. This has changed in recent years with today more than one fifth of the articles published relating to Global History or a non-European region. An important impetus behind this change of course was the re-orientation of Jürgen Kocka, one of the intellectual leaders of the school, towards Transnational History.²² However, the students of the Bielefeld masters are, from the point of view of Global History, a lost generation. Interest in Global History in West Germany was at its lowest ebb in the 1970s and 1980s when the main cohort of today’s chairholders, born in the 1950s, received their professional training.

(3) The current revival of Global History derives from the initiative of a new generation, typically born after 1960, who are now replacing the retiring post-war veterans on their chairs. An important journal for this generation is *Comparativ* (1991–), edited in Leipzig where Manfred Kossok, one of the most cosmopolitan and least doctrinaire historians of the German Democratic Republic, left a legacy of transatlantic studies and the comparative history of revolutions.²³ The new generation has been exposed to the cultural turn, the debate about orientalism and the postcolonial movement in general. It has also absorbed important influences from ethnology and cultural anthropology. The encyclopaedic interests of the immediate

post-war generation and the euro-centric indifference of the social historians have been followed by a strong turn to theory – not one theory, but to a broad repertoire of conceptual tools. The political agenda seems to have changed, too, but that is a different story.

Traditions, Living and Dead

What was left after 1945 of the various German traditions of *Weltgeschichte*? First of all, it is remarkable that popular interest in world history after the War was enormous. Continuing an earlier German infatuation with world history,²⁴ this considerable demand among a public of educated readers contradicted the snobbish reservedness in academia. The *Propyläen Weltgeschichte* – which, back in the 1960s, gave me and many others of my generation our first glimpses of world history – was just one among several similar ventures on a grand scale. Outstanding in size and quality was the *Fischer-Weltgeschichte* published between 1965 and 1981 in 36 volumes, several of them written by famous non-German authorities like the medievalist Jacques Le Goff or the British historian of imperialism, David Fieldhouse. The latest addition to this indestructible genre is the *Brockhaus Weltgeschichte* (6 vols., 1997–99), a solid work with little intellectual sparkle which I have never seen quoted anywhere. It continues a long line of multi-volume series that went back to the turn of the century around 1900 and even further to the Enlightenment. The attraction of world history in the early Federal Republic was probably due to a strong desire for cosmopolitan openness among the educated *Bildungsbürger* after the years of mental isolation and autarchy during the Nazi period.²⁵ From a different perspective, it may also have been an escapist retreat from political issues into the vast spaces of “alien civilizations”. It is important to note that popular attitudes to history after 1945 were not markedly nationalistic. Already one generation of high school pupils of the 1960s learned a lot, sometimes from excellent school textbooks, about the history of India, China or Africa, even with a critical perspective on colonialism. But this broad popular and educational undercurrent should not be seen as a scholarly tradition and did not support one. Where are the traditions?

(1) The Marxist tradition was ossified in communist East Germany into a schematic ideology that perpetuated crude notions of purportedly universal validity (“feudalism”, etc.). This did not devalue the work of a few excellent scholars on non-Western history, especially in early periods. In West Germany the Marxist tradition was almost entirely absent from academic discourse. There was never a group of unorthodox Marxist historians similar to the British school with its master historians E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill and Eric J. Hobsbawm. The discovery of

the Third World around 1968 hardly ever led to a historical involvement with it; few of the critics of the Vietnam War seriously turned to Vietnamese history. Marxism later reappeared in peculiar disguises as Wallersteinian world-system analysis or as specific forms of postcolonialism. Some of the potentials of the Marxist tradition merit reassessment beyond the frequent citation of Marx's and Engels's prophetic vision of incipient "globalization" (1848).

(2) The "morphological" analysis of civilizations in the footsteps of Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) may look like a candidate for tradition-building. But even in his own time, the author of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*, 1918–22) found many readers, but no serious disciples, apart from the Englishman Arnold J. Toynbee, a much greater historian. Toynbee was popular in Germany during the 1950s, but had little impact upon academic historiography.

(3) Sociological evolutionism as a special form of Universal History had a few German adherents in the early twentieth century, especially the prolific and now forgotten Kurt Breysig (1866–1940), a man of greater profundity than Spengler, but a writer of unpenetrable prose. It never captured the imagination of historians and flourishes only in subsections of sociology, for example in residual forms of modernization theory or in the distinction between the three (universal) stages of segmentary, socially stratified and functionally differentiated society in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. A different model of stages can be found in the work of Günter Dux.²⁶ In several books, Alfred Weber (1868–1958) outlined a universal sociology of culture, without convincing many people of it. Whether the very opposite of evolutionism – Gottfried Schramm's emphasis on choice and contingency in the bifurcation of historical pathways – will have a more profound influence, remains to be seen.²⁷

(4) (Max) Weberian historical sociology cannot, in spite of Max Weber's concept of "rationalization", be properly described as "evolutionist". It never assumed institutional shape as a "school". Max Weber (1864–1920) had to be rediscovered by historians from the late 1950s onwards. The Bielefeld protagonists of Historical Social Science applied some of his insights to the analysis of Western industrial societies and later used his concept of "charisma" to explain Bismarck's and Hitler's success. Weber's comparative interests and his deep immersion into non-Western civilizations (especially India and China) during the last years of his life evoked only faint responses. Yet it is obvious that nothing still replaces or even surpasses the analytical language provided in Weber's extensive and fragmented *œuvre*. Weber was anything but an admirer of the German "universal history" of his time which he dismissed as empty speculation. He rather took his universalist clues from extremely broad-minded contemporaries like the ancient historian Eduard Meyer (1855–1930) or the theologian and historian of ideas Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923).

Max Weber cannot be claimed as an ancestor of Global History Mark 1, since he cared little for long-range interactions. However some of his categories or “ideal types” (i.e., “patrimonialism”, “the occidental city”, the “types of legitimate rule”), framed without consideration for national history, continue to be useful for comparative world historical analysis. While there is no compact Weberian tradition, Weber’s influence is pervasive, sometimes mediated through independent disciples like S. N. Eisenstadt (b. 1922) or Wolfgang Schluchter (b. 1938). Next to Weber, the only “classical” sociologist still of some influence in German world history circles is Norbert Elias (1897–1990).

(5) There might have been a global economic history tradition in Germany. Before the First World War and until 1933, German economists and economic historians, many of them associated with the *Institut für Weltwirtschaft* (Institute of World Economy) in Kiel, were the most careful and astute observers of the first age of capitalist globalization after c. 1870. They produced a vast body of work much of which is still of great value. A book like August Sartorius von Waltershausen’s *Die Entstehung der Weltwirtschaft* (*The Rise of the World Economy*, 1931) retains its usefulness to the present day. This was a genuine German tradition based on the principles of the Historical School of Economics. For reasons that are not easy to understand, it was not continued after 1945. With the exception of Wolfram Fischer (b. 1928),²⁸ Hans Pohl (b. 1935)²⁹ and a handful of specialists on early modern colonial trade (foremost among them Hermann Kellenbenz, 1913–1990), no major economic historian developed an interest in the history of the world economy. The subject has disappeared almost entirely from the agenda of the younger generation. It is now reappearing as an attempt to insert Germany into early pattern of globalization³⁰ and as a concern, still highly empirical and somewhat undertheorized, for the history of global commodities and commodity chains.³¹

(6) Finally, there was (and is) something that cannot be described as a well-articulated “tradition”. It is rather an outlook, an attitude, a *Haltung*. A few historians who had experienced the Nazi period (Ernst Schulin, Reinhart Koselleck, Heinz Gollwitzer, Rudolf Vierhaus, et al.) never forgot that before the triumph of national history in the 1880s, there had been a powerful stream of cosmopolitanism in German thinking and scholarship, represented by the historians of the Göttingen Enlightenment (Johann Christoph Gatterer, 1727–1799; August Ludwig Schlözer, 1735–1809), by the representatives of the “Weimarer Klassik” – Johann Gottfried Herder, 1744–1803; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749–1832, who studied “world literature”; Friedrich Schiller, 1759–1805, who gave a famous inaugural lecture on Universal History – and by the brothers von Humboldt: Wilhelm, 1767–1835, the founder of comparative linguistics; Alexander, 1769–1859, the traveller, natural scientist and trenchant critic of Spanish colonialism. In his famous book *Weltbürger-*

tum und Nationalstaat (Cosmopolitanism and the Nation-State, 1908), the eminent historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954) had outlined the tension between these two principles in German intellectual history. After 1945, several historians, including the *Saeculum* group mentioned above, revived the memory of cultural sciences “before the nation-state”. Their direct influence on today’s younger generation of global historians seems to be negligible. However, they kept open a space of reflection that allowed a non-national historiography to develop alongside the German-centred mainstream.

On the whole, only few traditions related to Global History Mark 2 survived the Third Reich when socialist, liberal and Jewish (who were mostly liberals) historians were persecuted, driven into exile or condemned to silence and when sociology performed a racist (*völkisch*) turn and abandoned Max Weber’s alleged “formalism”. After 1945, there were several thin lines from the past, but no stable continuities to build upon. Ironically, the iconoclastic historians of the late 1960s and 1970s – the high tide of Historical Social Sciences – and 1980s concentrated all their formidable efforts on a re-writing of German national history in a spirit of Popperian rationalism and left-of-centre political critique. Their obsession with a German *Sonderweg* – a special path in modern history pointing away from the “normal” West European trajectory – that was asserted rather than studied through patient comparisons with other European countries, emphasized the centrality of national history even more. Thus national history was strengthened for completely non-nationalistic reasons. It became a project of the moderate Left. Sometimes, a professional interest in non-German history even kindled the suspicion of escapism, and the implied reproach that historians should not be skirting their duty to face the horrors of the recent German past.

There are a number of other reasons for the surprising weakness of Global History in a country where substantial contributions to its invention had been made. One is a preference, still to be found today, for a moderate Europeanization of historiography.³² If German historians, so the argument goes, want to extend their views they will be busy for a very long time improving their understanding of their fellow-Europeans. Why should they squander their intellectual and material resources by spreading them thinly over the rest of world? But the most important reason is another one: By comparison with almost all other European countries, Germany’s imperial and colonial history, if we leave aside Nazi imperialism, was brief (1884–1914/18), geographically restricted (to parts of Africa, a few islands in the Pacific and a tiny bit of China) and devoid of luster. Germans had no major stake in the Atlantic slave trade. Their colonies were taken over by other European powers after the First World War. They did not go through the tribulations of decolonisation. For a very long time, no voices from the former Wilhelmine

colonies demanded indemnities or apologies. No torture scandals involving living individuals disturbed the public mind as they still do from time to time in France. The German genocide in present-day Namibia in 1904/05 has received much publicity and scholarly interest, but less because of any enduring consequences than in the light of the question whether or not a straight path led directly from the African desert to Auschwitz – the most recent re-incarnation of the *Sonderweg* idea.³³ After the Second World War, immigrants into Germany did not originate from the former colonies, but from Turkey, Russia, the Balkans and Mediterranean Europe. For all these reasons, there was no imperial history in Germany to be upgraded to global history as it was successfully done in Britain.³⁴ Attempts to portray present-day Germany as a “postcolonial” country have failed to find much support. Global History therefore lacks roots both in a colonial past and a multicultural present.

The weakening of old traditions of world history writing made a re-start difficult to achieve. At the same time the lightness of tradition may have had certain advantages. On the one hand, an older generation kept the cosmopolitan flame alive. Ernst Schulin’s masterful anthology *Universalgeschichte* (1974), published at the peak of social history’s early triumphs, was a landmark event. It brought together reminiscences of the great tradition with exciting new work from and on various parts of the world. The younger generations that became active in the 1990s und 2000s, on the other hand, were free to respond to the many challenges that arrived from abroad. Their main way of responding was to throw themselves into theoretical debates.

Debates and Non-Debates

Some of the debates that might have been predicted, did not take place or passed Germany by. For example, German historians and sociologists failed to take notice of the global extension of the debates on revolution in the work of Theda Skocpol or Jack Goldstone.³⁵ Characteristically, these authors’ celebrated books on the comparative historical sociology of revolutions were never translated into German. Since global economic history was (and is) almost non-existent, no German author contributed substantially to the debate about the “great divergence” triggered by Kenneth Pomeranz and his companions in the California School.³⁶ “Big” world history ranging freely through the millennia has found no German advocates; almost all the work is done on history after 1500. The discovery of the global Middle Ages is still in its infancy.³⁷ Another non-event has been the confrontation between global historians and their adversaries. Global History has so far gone almost unchallenged. Even the sharpest polemicist around, the great Hans-Ulrich Wehler (b. 1931), leader

of the social history revolution in the 1970s and vigorously active to the present day, reacted, by his own standards, with mild tolerance and did not mete out the harsh treatment earlier applied to diplomatic history, the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*), to followers of Foucault or to the “new” cultural history. The more conservative mainstream of the profession has simply ignored Global History or has paid lip-service to the need to widen one’s horizon. Not even C. A. Bayly’s *Birth of the Modern World* stimulated the kind of detailed critique it was entitled to.³⁸ The reviews of the original or of its German translation were invariably written from a basically sympathetic point of view. This is good news and bad news at the same time: good news because the vicious battles among German historians may be a thing of the past, bad news because there is a danger that Global History will be allowed to inhabit its own cosy little world or enclave without making a major impact on the discipline as a whole. A serious voicing of scepticism, for example a critique of the methodology or the language of Global History, would certainly be welcome and help Global History to strengthen its own intellectual foundations.

For lack of a forceful challenge, the German debates have mostly been friendly quarrels among insiders. Four of them deserve special attention.

(1) For a couple of years, the most widely used catchphrase was the adjective “transnational”. It signalled a cautious transcendence of national history without a commitment to anything non-European, inter-continental or even global. The category lacks precision, and it came as a challenge only to those who had been told that national history was the normal state of affairs. Upon closer inspection, however, a great many phenomena in the modern world are difficult to contain within national boundaries. The relationship between national and transnational history is not really antagonistic. It depends largely on the particular interest of an observer if she or he wants to privilege the national or the transnational aspect of a given phenomenon. Earlier in this paper, I suggested my own definition of Transnational History. It reflects one among several uses put forward in a debate which took place between 2001 and 2006 in the Journal *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. The original question, posed by Jürgen Kocka, was a fairly specific one: Is it possible to research and write transnational *social* history? And if such social history is possible, how should it be done? In the course of a series of articles, unfortunately, the focus on social history got lost, and the original question was never comprehensively answered. Instead, several concepts of Transnational History were offered. They fall into three groups.³⁹

(a) According to the broadest of the three concepts, Transnational History is simply a historiography liberated from the constraints of the nation-state. It includes all sorts of comparative approaches.

(b) A second understanding is more limited and precise. It refers to the history of cross-border exchanges of all kinds. This is a history of transfers and also of interactions between colonies and metropolises. Of course, 'empire' is a highly relevant topic in this context. This second notion of 'transnational' has little room for comparison. As far as social history proper is concerned, it focuses on migrations and on the diasporas that result from them.

(c) A third concept of Transnational History is even more restricted. It disputes the assumption that transnational exchanges should always emanate from 'lower' units such as regional or national societies. The basic idea is that some of these exchanges can achieve a life of their own and establish levels of social reality above national states and societies. An example for this would be mobile elite groups who do not cultivate any particular national identity.

All of these three variants of Transnational History are still being used in German programmatic statements – the aim of the debate has not been to establish the superiority of one of them.

(2) The second debate is closely related to the first one and took place in Germany as well as internationally.⁴⁰ It turned around the merits of macro-historical comparison. For a number of years, there was a strong interest in comparison, mainly between European countries or across the North Atlantic, but sometimes also between Europe and Japan, or even transcending the "Western world". Those who recommended comparison as the apogee of historiographical sophistication soon met with resistance on the part of enthusiasts for a history of "entanglement" through transfer and interaction.⁴¹ Comparativism, as the older approach, found itself in some kind of tactical defence. In my personal view, this should not be understood as a strategic defeat. The debate over the primacy of comparison or the analysis of transfers is largely ill-conceived. In spite of certain logical problems that require attention, both approaches can be combined in praxis, as C. A. Bayly and others have demonstrated.⁴²

(3) A third issue refers to the German reception of postcolonialism.⁴³ This has not really led to a well-ordered debate, but rather to numerous individual choices and confessions of faith. The most ardent followers of postcolonial theory are to be found, in Germany as elsewhere, in departments of literature and in Cultural Studies. Interdisciplinary contacts between historians and students of literature (and popular culture) tend to be quite close in Germany. However, the study of colonial and imperial discourses has sometimes drifted into the hands of cultural critics who fail to see a need to take account of the research on colonies and colonialism done by historians. On the whole, the concerns of postcolonialism have created a common field of interest where divergent methodologies meet. This has made dialogue

easier and more difficult at the same time. I am not sure whether any *original* contribution to postcolonial studies has so far emerged from Germany.

(4) Perhaps the most important debate about the re-interpretation of a particular period in German history has focused on the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine *Kaiserreich* of 1871 to 1914/18. That Germany after unification became a major international power had, of course, been no secret to historians of international relations. But it had never kindled the curiosity of the ‘critical’ social historians. A reconsideration in transnational terms tried to link the domestic with the external point of view while extending the scope of international or transnational topics to include Germany’s position in the world economy, geopolitical visions or the influence of immigration on the development of German national identity.⁴⁴ The dispute sparked by this reassessment did not cast into doubt the basic legitimacy of such an approach. The contentious point was (and still is) whether a transnational perspective radically changes our idea of what the *Kaiserreich* was about or whether it merely adds a few touches of minor importance.

Finally one particular debate seems to lie ahead. The other most innovative tendency in recent German historiography besides Transnational and Global History has been a “new history of the political”.⁴⁵ Both have so far hardly taken notice of one another. This is basically a micro/macro problem. The new political historians consider politics to be symbolic communication. This aspect can best be observed in small spaces: ritual practices in well-defined arenas, speech acts performed inside the walls of a parliament building, etc. It seems to be difficult to get from there to the issues raised by global history – and vice versa. But the debate is urgent and it is likely to take place.

Notes

- 1 See also Hans-Heinrich Nolte, *Zum Stand der Weltgeschichtsschreibung im deutschen Sprachraum*, in: *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte*, vol. 9, no. 2 (summer 2008), 89–113 (with numerous references to recent publications).
- 2 The work of some leading representatives of this group is sampled in: Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s*, New York and Basingstoke 2007.
- 3 On the history of historiography see Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs, eds., *Writing World History 1800–2000*, Oxford 2003; Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, Harlow 2008.
- 4 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Britischer Imperialismus im Fernen Osten. Strukturen der Durchdringung und einheimischer Widerstand auf dem chinesischen Markt 1932–1937*, Bochum 1983; idem, *China und die Weltgesellschaft. Vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in unsere Zeit*, Munich 1989; idem, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1998; idem, *Shanghai, 30. Mai 1925: Die Chinesische Revolution*, Munich 1997; idem, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Princeton N.J. 1997; idem (with Niels P. Petersson), *Globalization: A Short History*, Princeton NJ 2005.

- 5 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2009.
- 6 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich*, Göttingen 2001. This book is discussed in Helmut Walser Smith, *For a Differently Centered Central European History: Reflections on Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats'*, in: *Central European History*, vol. 37, no.1 (March 2004), 115–36, and in a review article by Georg G. Iggers in: *History and Theory*, vol. 43, no.1 (February 2004), 146–154.
- 7 See several earlier attempts to explore the theoretical potential of macrohistorical approaches: Jürgen Osterhammel, *Außereuropäische Geschichte. Eine historische Problemskizze*, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, vol. 46, no. 5 (May 1995), 253–276; id., *Weltgeschichte*. Ein Propädeutikum, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, vol. 56, no. 9 (September 2005), 452–479; id., *Globalgeschichte*, in: Hans-Jürgen Goertz, ed., *Geschichte. Ein Grundkurs*, Reinbek 2007, 592–610; Jürgen Osterhammel, *Einleitung: Alte und neue Zugänge zur Weltgeschichte*, in: idem, ed., *Weltgeschichte*, Stuttgart 2008, 9–32.
- 8 Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*, New York 2003.
- 9 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Neuwied and Berlin 1962; translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Mass. 1989.
- 10 Christopher A. Bayly, *Die Geburt der Modernen Welt. Eine Globalgeschichte, 1780–1914*, Frankfurt am Main 2006.
- 11 Matthias Middell, ed., *Weltsystem and Globalgeschichte*, in: *Comparativ*, vol. 4, no. 5 (1994).
- 12 One series is “Edition Weltregionen”, published since 2001, the other one a new multi-volume global history whose first two volumes are: Peter Feldbauer and Jean-Paul Lehners, eds., *Die Welt im 16. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 2008 (= *Globalgeschichte. Die Welt 1000–2000*, vol. 3); Bernd Hausberger, ed., *Die Welt im 17. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 2008 (= *Globalgeschichte. Die Welt 1000–2000*, vol. 4).
- 13 Sebastian Conrad et al., eds., *Globalgeschichte: Theorien, Ansätze, Themen*, Frankfurt am Main and New York 2007.
- 14 Gunilla Budde et al., eds., *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, Göttingen 2006.
- 15 In analogy to Randall Collins, *Macrohistory: Essays in Sociology of the Long Run*, Stanford, Cal. 1999.
- 16 For excellent discussions of terminological problems see several articles in Margarete Grandner et al., eds., *Globalisierung und Globalgeschichte*, Vienna 2005. The following discussion omits “Big History”, a tendency that still has to find its German champions.
- 17 The title of Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft*.
- 18 Sven Beckert, in: C. A. Bayly et al., *AHR Conversation: On Transnational History*, in: *American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 4 (December 2006), 1441–64, at 1445.
- 19 The position of oriental studies within the matrix of academic disciplines is now hotly debated. See Abbas Poya and Maurus Reinkowski, eds., *Das Unbehagen in der Islamwissenschaft. Ein klassisches Fach im Scheinwerferlicht der Politik und der Medien*, Bielefeld 2008.
- 20 Matthias Middell, *Europäische Geschichte oder global history – master narratives oder Fragmentierung? Fragen an die Leittexte der Zukunft*, in: Konrad H. Jarausch and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Die historische Meistererzählung. Deutungslinien der deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach 1945*, Göttingen 2002, 214–252; id., *Histoire universelle, histoire globale, transfert culturel*, in: *Revue Germanique Internationale*, vol. 21 (2004), 227–244; id., *Die konstruktivistische Wende, der “spatial turn” und das Interesse an der Globalisierung in der gegenwärtigen Geschichtswissenschaft*, in: *Geographische Zeitschrift*, vol. 93, no. 1 (spring 2005), 33–44.
- 21 See, as one of the latest products of this tendency: Wolfgang Reinhard and Justin Stagl, eds., *Menschen und Märkte. Studien zur historischen Wirtschaftsanthropologie*, Vienna et al. 2007.
- 22 Budde et al., *Transnationale Geschichte*, is a Festschrift for Jürgen Kocka.
- 23 Matthias Middell, *Weltgeschichtsschreibung im Zeitalter der Verfälschung und Professionalisierung*. Das Leipziger Institut für Kultur- und Universalgeschichte 1890–1990, 3 vols., Leipzig 2005, vol. 3.

- 24 Hartmut Bergenthum, Weltgeschichten im wilhelminischen Deutschland: Innovative Ansätze in der populären Geschichtsschreibung, in: *Comparativ*, vol. 12, no. 3 (summer 2002), 16–56; Hartmut Bergenthum, *Weltgeschichten im Zeitalter der Weltpolitik. Zur populären Geschichtsschreibung im wilhelminischen Deutschland*, Munich 2004.
- 25 See also Ernst Schulin, *Universalgeschichte und abendländische Entwürfe*, in: Osterhammel, *Weltgeschichte*, 49–63.
- 26 Günter Dux, *Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur*, Weilerswist 2000.
- 27 Gottfried Schramm, *Fünf Wegscheiden der Weltgeschichte*, Göttingen 2004.
- 28 See Wolfram Fischer, *Expansion, Integration, Globalisierung. Studien zur Geschichte der Weltwirtschaft*, Göttingen 1998.
- 29 Hans Pohl, *Aufbruch zur Weltwirtschaft, 1840–1914. Geschichte der Weltwirtschaft von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, Stuttgart 1989.
- 30 Cornelius Torp, *Die Herausforderung der Globalisierung. Wirtschaft und Politik in Deutschland 1860–1914*, Göttingen 2005.
- 31 *Pioneering works were Hartmut Berghoff, Zwischen Kleinstadt und Weltmarkt. Hohner und die Harmonika 1857–1961: Unternehmensgeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Paderborn 1997; Annerose Menninger, *Genuss im kulturellen Wandel. Tabak, Kaffee, Tee und Schokolade in Europa (16.–17. Jahrhundert)*, Stuttgart 2004.
- 32 A concise statement is Ute Frevert, *Europeanizing German History*, in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington*, no. 36 (2005), 9–24.
- 33 For a judicious discussion of the issue see Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, *Der Holocaust als “kolonialer Genozid”? Europäische Kolonialgewalt und nationalsozialistischer Vernichtungskrieg*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 33, no. 4 (fall 2007), 439–466.
- 34 The pioneering article was A. G. Hopkins, *Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History*, in: *Past and Present*, no. 164 (1999), 198–243.
- 35 Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge 1979; Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, Berkeley, Cal. 1991.
- 36 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, N.J. 2000.
- 37 Thomas Ertl, *Seide, Pfeffer und Kanonen. Globalisierung im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 2008. The German response to Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, New York and Oxford 1989, was quite subdued. Other medieval historians who extend their vision beyond the Latin West are Folker Reichert, *Erfahrung der Welt. Reisen und Kulturbegegnung im späten Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 2001; Michael Borgolte, *Christen, Juden, Muselmanen. Die Erben der Antike und der Aufstieg des Abendlandes 300 bis 1400 n. Chr.*, Munich 2006.
- 38 The longest discussion was my own *Baylys Moderne*, in: *Neue Politische Literatur*, vol. 50, no. 1 (spring 2005), 7–17.
- 39 For a highly learned, but somewhat different discussion see Kiran Klaus Patel, *Überlegungen zu einer transnationalen Geschichte*, in: Osterhammel, *Weltgeschichte*, 67–89.
- 40 Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Geschichte und Vergleich. Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung*, Frankfurt am Main and New York 1996; Hartmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich. Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main and New York 1999. A much-praised specimen of global comparison was published by the Austrian historian Michael Mitterauer, *Warum Europa? Mittelalterliche Grundlagen eines Sonderwegs*, Munich 2003.
- 41 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, *Beyond Comparison: Histoire croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity*, in: *History and Theory*, vol. 45, no. 1 (spring 2006), 30–50; id., eds., *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*, Paris 2004.
- 42 See Johannes Paulmann, *Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer. Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 267, no. 2 (1998), 649–685; Matthias Middell, *Kulturtransfer und Historische Komparatistik – Thesen zu ihrem Verhältnis*, in: *Comparativ*, vol. 10, no. 1 (spring 2000), 7–41; Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft*, chs. 1–2.

- 43 Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, eds., *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main and New York 2002. An example of what postcolonialism accomplishes in the hands of a historian of literature is Axel Dunker, *Kontrapunktische Lektüren. Koloniale Strukturen in der deutschsprachigen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Paderborn 2008. For a good introduction in German see María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, Bielefeld 2005.
- 44 Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914*, Göttingen 2004; Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, Munich 2006; id., *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte*, München 2008; Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp, eds., *Das deutsche Kaiserreich in der Kontroverse*, Göttingen 2009.
- 45 Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, ed., *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* Berlin 2005; Ute Frevert, ed., *Neue Politikgeschichte. Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung*, Frankfurt am Main and New York 2005.