

Who is afraid of global history?

Ambitions, pitfalls and limits of learning global history

Abstract: This essay debates the present state of global history from four angles: defining global history, debating global history, teaching global history, and researching global history. My comments and suggestions reflect my own experiences, but also configure and support the choices I make in my teaching and research missions. We are witnessing new, global shifts as the centuries-long hegemony of European and Western societies and theories are increasingly challenged. This urges us to broaden and deepen the paths of global history. This is an essential task since the topics that we are dealing with have never been bigger, the questions we are tackling have never been more important, and the stakes have never been higher.

Key Words: Debating and teaching global history, researching global and world history

There is probably no branch on the big tree of the social sciences and the humanities that is so occupied with self-evaluation, self-criticism and self-inquiry as world history or global history.¹ Countless workshops, conferences, publications, newsletters and discussion threads are filled with debate, reflection and sometimes despair about the point and the direction of, and the methods used in global history. Time and again, we find ourselves debating, evaluating and reinventing the very existence of the discipline we so believe in.² Obviously, there are good historical reasons to do so, as we are defending a rather new perspective that aims to cross borders in time and space and between disciplines. The recent and growing visibility of global history in and outside academia requires strong supporting narratives. This constant stream of self-reflection has recently been broadened by shifts within scientific paradigms and academic knowledge (economic globalisation, global climate change, global governance etc.). ‘Home-grown’ in the West as an alternative to stories of

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western civilizational, imperial or economic expansion, the new global history of the early 21st century, tries to 'debunk' and replace former founding perspectives. Yet ongoing debates are still framed within the boundaries of hegemonic Western cultural knowledge. Increasingly there is discomfort with the dominant traditions within academic debates, which are transmitted by old western-centred sciences and formed with traditional academic communication tools, mostly limited to a global academic elite, and which exclude those who have little or no knowledge of the one and only hegemonic academic language. Being both a player within and an outcome of contemporary global transformations, world history needs to incorporate transformations within the scientific community. Where will we organize meetings about the future of world history in 2030? In which language(s) will we debate our field of research?

This essay presents some personal reflections by a strong believer in and a humble practitioner of world history, working in western academia in the early 21st century. I discuss the state of global history from four angles: defining global history, debating global history, teaching global history, and researching global history. My comments and suggestions reflect my own experiences, but also configure and support the choices I make in my teaching and research missions.

1. Defining Global History: communities, comparisons, connections and systems

The basic premise in global or world history is that historical trajectories of human individuals, groups, nations or civilizations only make sense within their mutual connections, within the context of a general human story. As with every historiographical narrative, global history also *creates* meanings. The focus is not on the peculiarity of each case, but on comparison and interconnection within a global context. In the humanities and the social sciences, global history has the potential to grow and develop into an independent discipline with specific research questions, theoretical debates, methodologies, and goals. In its ambition to survey the human journey, global history confronts the big questions of our time: demographic growth, ecological boundaries, food security/insecurity, political decision making, cultural diffusion, and social and economic inequality. As Jerry Bentley has stressed:

“World history is one of the big intellectual issues of our times. It draws attention to the mind-boggling processes of change, development, and transformation that human beings have generated and driven through time.”³

In its most basic definition, world or global history studies the beginnings, the growth and the changes in human communities from a comparative, interconnected and systemic perspective. Central concepts are communities, comparisons, connections and systems. It is not about the world as such; it is about human societies that have shaped this world. These communities or societies have to be studied in three ways: 1) from a comparative perspective to detect patterns, similarities and differences, 2) via their interactions, connections, circulations and conflicts, and 3) within the context of (large-scale) systems that condition human actions and historical development.

Global history stimulates different ways of looking at and thinking about human history. To being with, world history is another perspective; it moves away from particularistic forms of research that focus on ‘me and my case’.⁴ In world history, the actors are human individuals, groups, or communities, who live, create and reproduce within the theatre of a global human society. More than other branches of the human sciences, global history follows the famous motto of Karl Marx that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please. They do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”⁵ Men and women make choices in similar or differing circumstances. World history wants to know which choices are made and why. Answers may be found by focusing on the human journey in its entirety. That is why global history creates new meta-narratives, narratives about humans and humanity starting from local experience but always looking for broader connections, lineages, and patterns.

Secondly, global history is another way of thinking, of reflecting. World history is not about knowing, but about understanding (in German: *können* instead of *kennen*). That is why world history is an attitude, a way of understanding. Of understanding that behind each snapshot of the outside world there is a bigger picture; understanding that all human actions have to deal with the bigger questions of life (see below). The big questions and answers that feed world history constantly redefine the three dimensions that are interwoven in all human and social sciences: the spatial dimension (*world*), the temporal dimension (*history*) and the thematic dimension (*world history* or the history of human communities). These dimensions are never a given, they are the outcome of human, cultural choices. That is what world history tries to reconstruct. Global history constantly questions and debates chronological and spatial dimensions and boundaries. It understands that choices about time and space imply cultural prejudices and value judgments. Global history can discuss these biases and value judgments better than other disciplines.⁶

“The beauty of nature lies in detail, the message, in generality”, writes Stephan Jay Gould in his masterpiece *Wonderful Life*.⁷ Global insights into world history

can only be based on detailed local knowledge. The 'world' is not a tangible object, it is a concept defined by a set of overlapping scales. What looks like a semantic discussion quickly implies concrete choices about limits, frames and borders. It is not enough, however, to define the outer boundaries of space and time. Every perspective is the outcome of a multitude of scales, from micro (human actions) to macro (systemic forces). There is no basic scale, not even a global one. Every scale is linked to other levels of organization, smaller and larger. Every scale is modelled by human actions and choices, which cannot be deduced from one isolated scale or pattern. For example, economic transformations over the last five centuries or so can only partly explain the Industrial Revolution, in the same way that regional processes and individual actions have limited explanatory value. Scales only get their meaning from interdependency. This is also true of the global level, as we learn from global history. Large processes and big structures cannot be understood merely as aggregates of smaller patterns in time and in space. That is why global history needs a synchronous, comparative, interconnected and systemic approach. This is an interlinked approach, surpassing the limits of exclusively comparative, international, trans-national and/or systemic analyses.

Consequently, researching, teaching and writing global history has to follow a threefold trajectory: a comparative analysis of societies and human systems, an analysis focusing on connections, interactions, and circulations between societies and human systems, and a systems-analysis, looking at societal (economic, social, cultural) structures as units of analysis. This threefold trajectory has to be understood as a unity, or better, a trinity. This research strategy addresses two sets of basic questions in world history. Firstly, how do human groups and organizations try to attain similar goals within different contexts and with different means: the reproduction of the physical self, of their labour and knowledge, of their social and cultural patterns, of their societal organization? Which factors, internal or external, define different or diverging outcomes? Secondly, how do human groups and organizations reconfigure their societal systems in the wake of contacts, interactions or conflicts with other groups? Does this cause fragmentation, reconstruction, or expansion of societal systems?

World history tells the story of the world as a human society. It is a complex story, because boundaries are not given, as is often the case in national or civilizational histories. It is a complex story, because there is no dominant political, cultural or economic narrative. Ecological (humans/nature), economic (production), demographic (reproduction), social (power relations) and cultural (legitimization) interpretations merge into the big questions that support global history. It is a complex story, because it is not structured by reporting events and listing grand persons, but by analysis, comparison and interpretation. Finally, it is a complex story because

it does not (re)create another master narrative deduced from a singular interpretative scheme. It aims to create new meta-narratives with a view that is grand, an ambition that is pretentious, but with answers that are never absolute or final.

Methodological holism does not imply factual comprehensiveness. Global history is not, cannot be, the history of everything. Choices have to be made when it comes to timeframes, spatial boundaries and thematic angles. A framework has been chosen and constructed that refers to larger units of analysis such as societal or ecological systems. That way global history can tell a differentiated story by looking at big and small, at continuity and change, the particular and the general, causes and consequences. This way of making sense of human actions fundamentally distinguishes global history from other supra-national historical practices. At the same time, the search for histories of communities, comparisons, connections and systems, determines what world history is not:

- It is not universal history, a history of everything.
- It is not international or trans-national history, or a type of history that focuses predominantly on connections.⁸
- It is not comparative history, comparison being only one of the strategies to understand patterns in the human journey.
- It is not a (Western) civilization-history, which focuses on the emergence and success of one culture/civilization.
- It is not a non-Western history, framed in a set of ‘exotic’ area studies.
- It is not globalization studies focusing on and starting from current processes within global society.

2. Debating global history: history strikes back

Debating global history is also inquiring about the context of this debate. As national history was in the 19th century, the new global history of the early 21st century is a ‘child of its time’. If we want this child to grow up into an independent adult, the global history community must become global itself. This means connecting knowledge from different parts of the world, including insights from outside the global academic elites, and adding other world languages to the canon. More than before, the experience of global history must be placed within the experiences of a rapidly changing, ever more interconnected, but also ever more unequal world. By debating its roots, causes and consequences, the academic community is part of this transitional process. Evaluating, deconstructing and reconstructing a new global history are the central tasks. Below is a list of ten personal reflections that, for me, draw the contours of this debate.

1. World history is about connections, but not only about connections. Global or world history has been mainly defined with the help of the Latin prepositions *inter*, *trans*, *cum* and *meta*, in an ever changing order. Most of its practitioners will agree that global history de-nationalizes and connects. A very important *raison d'être* is found in the deconstruction of state-centred stories. It is, or should be, a new perspective that generates new questions and forges new answers. Units of analysis are deconstructed; connection is the central concept that recreates them. As Pat Manning wrote, "To put it simply, world history is the story of connections within the global human community."⁹ New metaphors such as flows, networks, webs and new epithets as trans-national history, entangled history, shared history or *histoires croisées* aim to translate the experience of border-crossing interconnections. Connections, however, are created and redefined in a world that is not flat. Inequality defines the direction and the impact of connections. They have to be analyzed within, rather than next to, a systems-perspective of connected and diverging zones. Societal relations configure the world on different levels or scales. In order to understand how they influence each other, we need a scheme of analysis that integrates connections and networks with that of (differing) scales and (over-arching) systems.

2. Global history needs to have global ambitions. Seeking to pose new questions obviously includes the ambition to formulate new answers. Big questions seek big answers; answers that deal with big structures, large processes and huge comparisons, to use the famous expression of Charles Tilly.¹⁰ This concurs with the passionate plea of Patrick O'Brien for new "cosmopolitan meta-narratives in global history [...] that might at one and the same time, deepen our understanding of diversities and scale up our consciousness of a human condition that has for millennia included global influences, and intermingled with local elements in all its essential dimensions."¹¹ Across the wide diversity of themes, perspectives, methods and angles, global historians should build global vocabularies and common concepts that facilitate the debate about the general ambitions that unite us.

3. Practical barriers associated with practicing global history slow down its expansion. These barriers are manifold and often huge. They often dominate discussions within the community of global historians, for good reason, but at the same time they prevent the exchange of ideas about what connects us rather than what divides us. Most problematic is the need for collaborative and discipline-crossing research networks; an ambition that clashes with existing, disciplinary practices related to funding and evaluation. Dependence on national research foundations and lack of experience with international funding organisations are serious obstacles in the expansion of global history as a research field. Much more time and effort has to be invested in the international, cooperative training of graduate students,

researchers, and Ph.D. students (including language training), and in communication platforms outside the established institutions and languages. We need more institutional anchoring of global history worldwide. Existing disciplinary divisions slow down this process.

4. Global history's audience is diverse; it includes readers, students, and our academic peers. Our means of communication are just as diverse; they include bestselling authors on the one hand, and reports written by high-profile research groups on the other. Most of the successful literature that is useful for interpreting the world happens to be the outcome of individual projects that were not created with a global perspective per se. Other publications with a clear-cut, global ambition often do not reach the general public. Ever-present questions should be: Who are we writing for? Why should people know this? What is global history good for? What are we missing if we exclude the global dimension? Global history is never self-evident. It has to have 'exposure', not only to sell itself but also to keep us awake and alert.

5. Most of us will agree that 21st-century global history has to be a 'decentred' history. Much of the drive for a 'new' global history started with the aim to surpass or delegitimize the 'old' Eurocentric stories of the rise of a unified world. A central paradox in world history is that, as a product of the centre of modernity, it tries to understand and deconstruct its roots that are squarely in civilization history, modernisation theory and Eurocentrism. We must, however, avoid new south- or east-centric master narratives, as much as we do not want to fall into the post-modern trap of ever-changing but equal 'truths' and 'universalities'. Decentring the human story does not imply a 'politically correct' flattening of experiences around the world, nor does it need to become a basket of 'alternative', anti-hegemonic local stories and area-studies. In order to avoid that it decomposes into a set of separate stories, global history needs to urgently take up the debate about unifying meta-levels of analysis, and the paradigms that bring us together, rather than those that divide us.

6. The eternal quest for trans-disciplinarity is an important mover in global history; crossing disciplines goes to the very heart of global history. The emergence of modern world history is rooted in new research in social, biological and physical sciences. On the other hand, deep chasms seem to continue to exist between economic and ecological history and varieties of history that focus more on culture. New efforts to develop a language of multitudes and different universalities risks to split up knowledge even more. In order to develop common paradigms and common tongues we need to engage with social theory more thoroughly. Global history and global studies often still are different worlds, physically and intellectually. We need open discussions about theoretical frameworks and practical methodologies that can link both fields. Concepts such as global economy (globalisation), global

community, global governance and global ethics, have to be taken on board (critically!) within world history.

8. Global history tells emancipating stories; stories that connect human actions within a broader human-made world. This is not a plea for legitimising stories, but for a morally charged program. World history does not exchange a national perspective for other exclusive frameworks, either global or sub-national. It does not essentialize new concepts like the non-West, the Global South or the subaltern. It does, however, create an emancipating space for action, interaction or resistance through the idea of contingency. Engagement in global history cannot be translated directly into an ideology or directly put to a concrete use. It is the lubricating oil in the paradigmatic engine that drives global history; paradigms that question the relationship between peoples and powers. Because world history tells us about the complexity of both the past and present worlds, it makes moral claims about today and tomorrow. Since differences and diversity are basic components of the human story, world history shows that understanding and handling differences is an important moral skill. Claims, interpretations and evaluations can not be made solely in the framework of our own, known world; they must reflect the complexity of human history.

9. Global history not only has to promote a 'transnationalization' of knowledge, it must also deal with a sharp hierarchy in academic knowledge. As Dominique Sachsenmaier has argued, this has become so much part of our academic reality that it is usually not even problematised.¹² Unequal worlds of knowledge create an unequal exchange of insights. "This privileged position, which makes Western scholarship primarily an exporter but not an importer of theory, may indeed be rooted in an unequal, Eurocentric global past."¹³ Every debate about the status and the future of global history cannot escape the fundamental question: How do our patterns of knowledge reflect the existing hierarchical systems of knowledge?

10. With the emergence of a new global history, history finally strikes back. Pat Manning argues that historical study is indeed undergoing a revolution, with world history currently in the lead.¹⁴ History, as the discipline studying time and place, deals with interactions and the hierarchy of scales in the human world. In that way it provides us with a protective shield against the threat of an undifferentiated multitude of new stories. The historical project serves two goals. First, it provides a ceaseless stream of detailed knowledge and case-studies. Secondly, it advances the levels of ambition, time, place and themes, of questions and answers. Historicising does not create a new, totalising master-narrative, a lack of historical knowledge does. History asks for new meta-questions and generates new meta-narratives.

3. Learning Global History: a teaching experiment

I have been teaching an introductory course for first-year students at Ghent University since 2005. It is a very mixed group consisting of students from the departments of history, archaeology, philosophy, African and Asian studies.¹⁵ The setting is a big auditorium of 500-600 students. My method of teaching includes a series of orations lasting two hours each, augmented with a slideshow. For almost half of the students, this is the last history course they will ever have. Within this challenging, and in many respects unique setting I built up my course, starting from four principles: the course has to attract, or seduce, historians and non-historians alike; the course must address both historical and contemporary interests; the course must elucidate the relevance of the global perspective for a broad audience; and, the course must show that in order to understand the past, one must know the contemporary world, and vice versa. That is why I have chosen a thematic angle, connecting past and present worlds. Three basic story lines/research questions guide my teaching project.

1. The gradual (internal) expansion of human societies in relation to (external) ecological constraints and challenges. Every society displays comparable societal patterns: forms of social order and cohesion, forms of language and communication, forms of leadership, forms of food provisioning, and forms of demographic and social reproduction (fertility, child-raising, family formation, etc.). Within these patterns, similar or differing choices have to be made. The nature of these choices is largely determined by the natural contexts in which these groups survive.
2. By increasing interaction, human groups are incorporated in bigger, overarching structures, called cultures or civilizations. Each of these cultures has to formulate answers to the same challenges and make choices about the system of (political) command (state, leadership, bureaucracy, etc.), the system of (economic) survival (agriculture, trade, industry, plundering, etc.), the system of (social) control (legitimization, repression, etc.), and the system of (cultural) morals (religion, etc.). What determines the differences and similarities in the choices made within each culture or civilization?
3. The contacts, connections, and conflicts between cultures and civilizations generate new general patterns such as trade, migration, cultural diffusion or imitation, plundering, conquest, war, and incorporation. These contacts or conflicts often generate broader societal systems. Which ones are successful, which are not?

These story lines offer insight into the nature of the human journey. Moreover, they teach students that overview, comparison, and connections within knowledge (*kön-*

nen) are much more important than the accumulation of knowledge itself (*kennen*). Context not only matters, it is the key. Historical processes (familial cohabitation patterns, cultural reproduction systems or processes of state formation) never develop in isolation. By reconstructing the big picture, world history gives meaning to the myriad of human actions that form the world as we know it. In order to reconstruct the big picture, we must understand the following concepts:

1. Throughout history societies have come and gone, succeeded, perished, or they have destroyed each other, and they therefore have never remained the same. Nonetheless, they share an important set of basic characteristics. They all develop material survival mechanisms, political command systems, social and gender relations, cultural patterns, demographic and social reproductions systems. They are not equal, but they can be studied *in comparison*. This approach clarifies the way men and women structure their lives within the context of group-formation and external limitations.
2. Human societies develop, grow and change *because of interaction*. Patterns of interconnection can only be made visible on levels of analysis that supersede the individual case.
3. Human societies are interconnected *on a systemic level*, there exist large-scale units of analysis that condition historical development.

Students learn how world history tries to understand human actions and patterns in a comparative, interconnected and systemic way. By using multiple lenses, we can reconstruct narratives that are fragmented and make them more interconnected. World history connects human beings, peoples and cultures. It connects places and periods. It connects the world of yesterday with the world of today. It tells a historical yet contemporary story. These insights are translated into ‘competences’ directed at understanding and applying. They include translating the central aims of world history into practical applications (comparisons, connections, and systems), explaining how diverging scales of analysis generate diverging explanations (examples), understanding how processes of interaction and diffusion reconfigure global society, and evaluating generalized or universal statements.

When looking for a good textbook, I was surprised to discover that a comprehensive, thematic introduction that would suit my needs did not exist. I wrote a text myself and had it published in Dutch: *Wereldgeschiedenis. Een inleiding* (Ghent, Academia Press, 201 pages) (*World History. An Introduction*). The book and the course are divided into ten chapters/classes (each session consists of two blocks of 75 minutes, actually 120-130 minutes). Each session starts with and returns to a relevant question in our contemporary world. I have developed an interactive slideshow that includes images, maps, charts, tables, pictures, etc. The slides illustrate the story while adding new information. The syllabus consists of the book and the

slides. Students have to learn the story as it is set out in the book and in class, and have to actively integrate the slides that were presented. The course/textbook contains the following chapters:

1. World history: a history of the world? An introduction to the theme and the perspective: a way of looking, a way of thinking. Why study world history? Traditions in world history.
2. A human world: man and mankind. Here the focus is on demography, migration, family, mortality.
3. A natural world: ecology and economy: ecology, climate, energy, limits to growth.
4. An agrarian world: farmers, agriculture and food: agricultural revolutions, agricultural exchange, the end of rural societies.
5. A political world: government and governors: mini-systems, empires, states and state-systems, global governance.
6. A divine world: civilizations and religions: definitions of civilization, discussions about the West, cultures and religions.
7. A divided world: The West and the Rest. The rise of the West and the Great Divergence, internal versus external explanations.
8. A global world: globalization or globalizations. In search of globalization(s), the roots of globalization, the rhetorical and ideological struggle.
9. A polarized world: development, poverty and inequality. Visions on and debates about development, poverty and inequality, past and present.
10. A world in pieces: unity or fragmentation. Scales of time, scales of place, interactions and research frames.

The book's structure illustrates the central focus of my global history course: providing 'an introduction to' and not 'an overview of'. The chapters/classes focus on the big questions in world history: How man evolved from an endangered to a successful species; How nature moulded human history; How agricultural societies pushed human history in a new direction; How mankind organized itself in ever more complex governing systems; How man developed new religious and cultural patterns; How the trajectories of 'The West' and 'The Rest' diverged over the last five centuries; How the world became more interconnected and global over the last five centuries; How this world is characterised by growing gaps in wealth, poverty and inequality.

4. Learning Global History: learning by doing?

In addition to being a pedagogical project, world history is increasingly becoming an important (and hopefully pioneering) research project within the human

and social sciences. However, it is still relatively few historians who would describe themselves as “doing research in world history”.¹⁶ The bumpy road of specialisation and professionalisation within academia is at least partly responsible for this. Most teachers of and researchers in world history have a traditional historical background; they often specialized in non-European history. In my case, I started out as a rural historian, trained in the French *Annales* tradition of village studies. Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis confronted me with the outside world; not as a descriptive background variable, but as a crucial scale of analysis even in small-scale micro-research.¹⁷ Yet in many academic settings, this ‘enlarged perspective’ is not warmly welcomed in teaching and research, to put it mildly. I was able to build up my interest in global history gradually, via my introductory courses and research projects that focused on development theories. Another impeding factor is the (sometimes deliberate) confusion between the concepts world, global, total, and the mostly infertile discussions about the differences between inter, trans, cum and meta. In their editorial to the first issue of the *Journal of Global History*, William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz and Peer Vries point out that the global perspective does not necessarily entail taking the whole globe as the framework of analysis. The geographical framework should consist of *zones of interaction* between diverse societies, rather than regions dominated by one particular ‘civilization’ or ‘oecumene’.¹⁸ Still, the ‘world’ is too often defined as a common denominator, with limited explanatory power. The Report on the *World History Research Agenda Symposium* (Boston 2006), which summarized the debate regarding the relevance of world history, concluded:

“At the most general level, the phrase ‘world history’ expresses a willingness to move beyond existing thematic, regional and chronological frameworks, to experiment with a variety of different conceptual, spatial and temporal scales that raise new types of questions and encourage new forms of comparative study.”¹⁹

Related to the debates about theme and content (see also *supra*), a central problem regarding training and research in global history is that a common methodology and treatment of sources is lacking. If a school of world history existed, it would have many classrooms. For example, when studying the problem of economic development, the world-systems perspective would see this as a function of global structural relationships, while a more institutional economics perspective would emphasize the analysis of different configurations of state, business and labour to understand global economic differences.²⁰ In both cases, one could write a world or global history, yet the stories might in fact have little in common, apart from their initial research interest, due to what we might call different ideological stands. As Raymond Grew has

put it, world history is marked by “high productivity but topical lacunae, conceptual weakness and limited consensus”. On the bright side, Grew acknowledges that this also provokes fresh perceptions and new questions, pushing beyond established categories and challenging familiar assumptions.²¹ In addition, students and researchers in world history seldom find their sources grouped together in archives or presented comprehensibly in any source guide. Except for some quantitative data series such as trade and migration statistics, archival entries are mostly created to study local or national phenomena. Moreover, world history cannot borrow uncritically the methodological toolboxes from more traditional human and social sciences. Data and sources must be ‘reread’ with new concepts and tools, such as comparative analysis, network analysis or systems analysis. Last but not least, a further professionalisation of world history needs more integration of paradigms and insights from social and physical sciences. That is not easy. It very probably will have to emerge on a project-by-project basis, via trial and error, by ‘doing’ it.

As in all social sciences, a research project starts with a *research object*. That can be a case, flows, networks, or systems. To understand the nature of the object we need a *research framework*. This is composed of a set of three units of analysis: time, space and theme. This framework has to be elucidated and accounted for because it defines which questions will be asked, and which answers will be formulated. The research framework is the legend that is needed to read the map that is drawn; the basis of the story that will be told. A research framework also channels the search for data, sources, methods, concepts, and units of analysis. What is the best choice, to study social inequality or demographic change? When do we use the concept civilization, and why? The research object and research framework define the research strategy, the way we want to understand what happened to the research objects. Basic strategies in world history include making comparisons, looking for connections, and searching for broader patterns or systems. Most popular, even in world history, is the case study, or the comparative analysis of two or more case studies. The main motivation is the broader relevance of cases (as examples or norms, or sometimes as exceptions), and the power of systematic comparison of the cases. A strong metaphor in recent world history is networks. Networks can be regarded as cases, units, but without clear-cut boundaries. A network analysis focuses on flows, nodes, exchange, relations, fusion, diffusion, etc. more than (comparative) case studies do. It tells stories about connections, circulations, interactions, conflicts. A systemic analysis tries to grasp deeper, broader, and certainly more complex fields of interaction. A system is a unit with a logic and mechanisms of its own, which can only be understood on its systemic level. Systems analysis looks for patterns and processes on a systemic scale, on the level of unity. Trade systems, political systems, and economic systems cannot be fully understood by simply adding up knowledge

from existing subsystems. They are more than the sum of their parts. The existing global economic system is much more than the sum of different national economic systems (the capitalist world-system). The same is true of political systems (inter-state system). Systems theory is holistic in nature, stating that a whole can never be understood only via its parts. These 'meta-systems' are not closed unities, but open historical systems with a specific historical trajectory of growth and decline. Systems analysis tries to detect which structures and processes tie together the actions and choices of human groups. It tries to map out which horizontal (between subsystems) and vertical (between scales) ties define the spaces of human action.

Two current research projects in the History Department of Ghent University illustrate the way we make choices within this integrated research framework. The first project analyzes the roles of both governmental and business agencies when explaining the spatial configuration and transformation of trans-national copper production networks within an integrated Atlantic market.²² This market developed throughout the 20th century (1870–2000) in response to a growing demand for refined copper, a vital conductor and building component. Since Adam Smith, it is commonplace that a process of market integration should lead to specialization. However, it would be a mistake to simply distinguish between copper importing and exporting countries within the Atlantic market. Looking at specialization in this respect, e.g. from a commodity trading perspective, can only highlight part of the process. That is why this study applies a so-called commodity chain perspective. This perspective builds on the idea that the natural resource business is about more than just capturing the earth's minerals or vegetation and exporting it. The natural resources it deals with are turned into economic commodities by means of different production processes that do not need to take place in the same region or country. From cashew nuts to copper, natural resources are at the beginning of production chains that are often trans-national, even transcontinental. In the case of copper, the production chain connects the phases of mining, smelting and refining and the places where these production processes occur; all within the space of a growing copper market. The question is not which country exports or imports copper. The question is: To what extent is the national copper business primarily engaged in the mining, smelting or refining stage of the copper production chain? This is an important nuance, since value is added to the natural resource while it passes through the production chain and gradually turns into a commodity with greater potential use-value as well as exchange-value. By looking at the question of specialization from this angle, the commodity chain perspective complements a trade perspective in trying to understand the link between natural resources and (national) economic development. It goes beyond simplistic notions that identify natural resources as curses or blessings.

With the copper commodity chain as the research object, what are the research framework and strategy? They are twofold. In the first research strategy, we look at a dataset of production numbers that show us the evolving patterns of specialization within the Atlantic market during the long twentieth century. To explain how and why these patterns came about, we need to step out of the data and into the archives, so to speak. No single process of specialization meets textbook free-market conditions or happens in a political vacuum. In order to understand what is actually going on, we must comprehend the international circuits of political and market power in which both governmental and business agencies are embedded. We also need to appreciate local differences in historical trajectories, geography, political economy, etc. In other words, the network approach of the commodity chain implies a more global and local/regional/national perspective in order to understand the chain itself. To do so on a global scale would be impossible in the context of a single Ph.D. thesis. That is why we choose a second research strategy: to zoom in on one case study. By looking at the Atlantic market as one integrated copper commodity circuit, this study takes a closer look at how the regional copper deposits of Katanga, the southern province of the Democratic Republic of Congo, were integrated into this circuit. This is first and foremost a history of colonization (1900–1960), with Belgian and British capital developing a local copper business that was specialized in mining, not refining. Yet it also goes beyond this; it is also the history of what followed colonization: the failed attempts, after political independence, to achieve economic independence and refine the copper ores domestically. It is a story with clear protagonists and institutions (Société Générale de Belgique, Union-Minière du Haut-Katanga, Gécamines, the Ministry of Colonies, the Congolese presidents, etc.), archival sources, and a broad base of secondary literature that was written from various viewpoints (colonial studies, world-systems analysis, modernisation theory, and Third-World studies). By combining these two strategies, this research does not aim to fill up a particular historiographical lacuna; it hopes to come to a better understanding of the processes of market integration, specialization and economic development.

A second project focuses on the impact of disintegrating peasant societies in a comparative and global perspective: *The end of peasant societies? Comparative and global research into the decline and disappearance of peasantries and its impact on social relations and inequality (1500–2000)*.²³ The research object is three examples of transforming peasant societies: Western Europe (North Sea Area), East China (Yangtze Delta) and Brazil (the North). The *longue-durée* time-frame, the topological choice of the cases (referring to different strata in the world-system) and a focus on the place of rural societies within broader processes of transformation, define the boundaries of the research framework. The main hypothesis behind the research

strategy is that the 'global' capitalist world-system with its roots in the European Late Middle Ages has constantly 'fuelled' itself by means of a process of incorporation, transformation and eventually absorption of 'regional' peasant societies. The extraction of goods, labour and capital from the 'non-capitalist' rural society was (and is) vital for the expansion of the system. The timing and phasing of these processes are very unequal over time and place. The project aims at reconstructing these processes and wants to measure the impact of the destabilization/dismantling of peasants societies on economic performances and social inequality. The research strategy is structured in three steps. First, we reconstruct the process of the disintegration of peasant societies in a global context. Then we analyze the causes of this process, general causes (related to the global process of transformation) and specific causes (related to time and place). Finally, we ask what the impact was of differences in space (zoning within the world-economy) and time (phase of incorporation). To answer these questions, we follow a twofold methodology. First, we present a global overview using a collection of data on peasants and peasant societies while applying a long-term perspective (we concentrate on five periods, five 'benchmarks': 1600, 1800, 1900, 1950, and 2000). Then we make a comparative analysis of the transformation and dismantling of peasant societies in different times and places. These will be described as cases and analyzed comparatively, with a focus on how the peasant societies function (labour, property, income, household level, locality, and regional level), the position of these societies within broader societal structures (trade and commerce, fiscal systems, power and property relations, regulation, and institutions), the transformation of these societies, and the effects on social relations, survival and income positions. This twofold research strategy brings together information from three thematic clusters:

1. ruralization/urbanization (population, (agrarian) production, exchange circuits, etc.);
2. demographic processes and patterns (household formation, gender/age patterns, migration, etc.),
3. income structures, property relations and social protection.

The project combines different themes, strategies and perspectives. The integrated comparative (three cases), interconnected (relations between the three zones) and systemic (integration and incorporation within the capitalist world-system) approach gives this research its 'global' perspective: what are the timing, causes and effects of the 'end of peasantries' on a global scale? In what way can the 'European experience' be reconstructed or deconstructed in a more global experience? What do the different 'local' stories of incorporation tell us?

To conclude, performing research in the field of world history is very similar to any other type of historical research. You start by posing intriguing questions,

finding the right sources to answer them, and constructing a methodological and theoretical framework to make the sources speak. The added value of world history is that it provokes new questions and proposes alternative ways of looking at the past by integrating the concepts of community, comparison, connection and system. The new meta-stories are disconnected from the particular interests of a group, nation, or people. They reconstruct the diversity of the human experience within the entangled history of the human journey. The opportunities for a new global history have never been better. Not only has our knowledge about human societies of every time and place increased, our methodological toolboxes and models of interpretation have been extended, refined and sharpened. We have learned from the insights and failures from introspective national and civilizational histories. We are witnessing new, global shifts as the centuries-long hegemony of European and Western societies and theories are increasingly challenged. We have the means for real dialogue using knowledge from outside the West. This urges us to broaden and deepen the paths of global history. This is an essential task since the topics that we are dealing with have never been bigger, the questions we are tackling have never been more important, and the stakes have never been higher.

Notes

- 1 I use global history and world history as interchangeable concepts, i.e. as synonyms. Many thanks to Jan-Frederik Abbeles for his suggestions and remarks.
- 2 The most complete and challenging overview remains Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History. Historians create a global past*, New York and Basingstoke 2003. The leading forum about 'learning and teaching world history' is the free e-journal *World History Connected*, www.worldhistoryconnected.org, affiliated with the World History Association and published by the University of Illinois Press. "World History Connected is designed for everyone who wants to deepen the engagement and understanding of world history:" *H-World* is a quintessential discussion list, a member of H-Net Humanities & Social Sciences Online, <http://www.h-net.org/~world>. "The H-World discussion list serves as a network of communication among practitioners of world history. The list gives emphasis to research, to teaching, and to the connections between research and teaching."
- 3 Jerry H. Bentley, *Why Study World History?* in: *World History Connected*, vol. 5, issue 1 (2008) <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu>.
- 4 This can vary from small (a group, region, nation) to large (European or Western civilization).
- 5 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>.
- 6 See for example David Christian, *This Fleeting World. A short history of humanity*, Great Barrington, Ma. 2008, 97–105; Saskia Sassen, *The places and spaces of the global. An expanded analytic terrain*, in: D. Held and A. McGrew, eds., *Globalization theory. Approaches and controversies*, Cambridge UK 2007, 79–105.
- 7 Stephen J. Gould, *Wonderful Life. The Burgess shale and the nature of history*, London et al. 1989, 13.
- 8 See the definition of transnational history by Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier in their introduction to *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, Basingstoke 2009 (see www.transnationalhistory.com) that very much limits its ambition to an empirical description of border crossing

connections and flows: “We are interested in links and flows, and want to track people, ideas, products, processes and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between polities and societies.”

- 9 Manning, *Navigating World History*, 3.
- 10 Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, New York 1984.
- 11 Patrick O’Brien, Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history, in: *Journal of Global History*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2006), 3–39, 38.
- 12 Dominic Sachsenmaier, World history as ecumenical history? in: *Journal of World History*, vol. 18, issue 4 (2007), 465–489.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 472.
- 14 Manning, *Navigating World History*, 11.
- 15 The reform of the Flemish educational system into a bachelor/master structure created the opportunity to introduce a new general history course in the Faculty of Arts at Ghent University. I was able to set up the course after conducting long debates over European versus world history, and after overcoming many doubts regarding the academic relevance of a global view. History students can choose within their Master’s degree a world history trajectory by following research seminars and writing a master thesis.
- 16 Barbara Weinstein, History without a cause? Grand narratives, world history, and the postcolonial dilemma, in: *International Review of Social History*, vol. 50, issue 1 (2005), 71–93, 80.
- 17 Eric Vanhaute, Processes of peripheralization in a core region. The Campine area of Antwerp in the long nineteenth century, in: *Review. Fernand Braudel Center*, vol. 16, issue 1 (1993), 57–81.
- 18 William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz and Peer Vries, Editorial, in: *Journal of Global History*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2006), 1–2.
- 19 David Christian, Potukuchi Swarnalatha and Marilyn Lake, Mapping world history. Report on the World History Research Agenda Symposium, Boston, November 10–12, 2006, 8. The report can be downloaded from http://www.worldhistorynetwork.org/conference/Mapping_Report.pdf (accessed March 9th, 2009)
- 20 Lauren Benton, From the world-systems perspective to institutional world history: culture and economy in global theory, in: *Journal of World History*, vol. 7, issue 2 (1996), 261–295, 278.
- 21 Raymond Grew, Expanding worlds of world history, in: *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 78, issue 4 (2006), 878–898, 879 and 897–898.
- 22 This research is conducted by Jan-Frederik Abbeloos. The research greatly benefited from postgraduate training at the Dutch/Flemish N.W. Posthumus Institute, a member of ESTER, the European graduate School for Training in Economic and Social Historical Research. The research was presented at the Second Annual Workshop of the Commodities of Empire project (London, 11–12 September 2008) and the Workshop History of Commodities and Commodity Chains (Konstanz, 26–28 February 2009). Both initiatives prove that commodities can be a valuable inroad into world history, almost making world history tangible. Within this broad panorama of commodity studies, the commodity-chain framework with its focus on networks and connections directly connected to many of the questions global history poses. More information on this research program is available at <http://www.nieuwstegeschiedenis.ugent.be/jfabelloos>.
- 23 See more in detail Eric Vanhaute, The end of peasantries? Rethinking the role of peasantries in a world-historical perspective, in: *Review. Fernand Braudel Center*, vol. 31, issue 1 (2008), 39–59.