

The Tides of Global History

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It seems the tide that was going out is already coming back in. During my time in graduate school, historians were trading in truffles for parachutes, which is to say, trading an interest in the smallest scale for the largest.¹ Microhistories were giving way to global histories that sought to make sense of a globalized world. Nevertheless, just as we have soured on globalism, so too global history. Global histories readily became, to borrow a line from David Damrosch, “culturally deracinated, philologically bankrupt, and ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of global capitalism.”² All the while, as the water went out and comes back in, I feel as though I have been standing still. I study a tideless sea, the sea in the middle. What can a Mediterraneanist learn from the ebbs and flows of Global History?

For my own part, I chose the Mediterranean because it satisfied a fledgling disposition toward research that crossed national and disciplinary boundaries. I wanted to study a world where Jews, Christians, and Muslims met to trade goods and ideas, a history that seemed redemptive. But I never saw myself as doing world or global history but rather something akin to connected history.³ With training in Latin and Arabic, my ambitions—I imagined—were less grand, grounded in the lived experience of the sea’s denizens. The Mediterranean—or the western Mediterranean, to be exact—was a world within a world, one with narrower horizons. Somewhere between the local and the global, the individual and the collective, I was content to navigate the middle.

The tides of global history have risen and fallen before. In the time of Goethe, Marx and Engels, or Rabindranath Tagore, world history meant something ambitious and optimistic. It signified the end of nationalism and imperialism, and the emergence of a new order, in which no language or nation dominated: “In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have commerce in every direction, universal interdependence of

1. The distinction between historians as truffle-hunters or parachutists is credited to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. See J. H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 197.

2. David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 4 (2011): 455–85, at 456.

3. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (January 1997): 735–62.

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nationals.”⁴ This new world order would enable the commerce of goods and ideas on a global scale and thus shed the national parochialism of the past. This confidence, however, in human progress did not survive the crises of the twentieth century. To its critics, the new world order seemed cold and partial. It lacked in drama and passion. Commenting on the first photographs of earth from space, Martin Heidegger complained, “This is no longer the earth on which man lives.”⁵ Against the abstract and universal pretention of the global, Heidegger was one among many who called for a return to the local and lived experiences of man.⁶ In other words, the tide that swept up my teachers’ generation reflected a renewed faith in cosmopolitanism, in a world of connection and interdependence, and as that tide ebbs once more, we complain again that the global order is anything but genuinely global.⁷

In fact, the Mediterranean shares the same historiographical tide. Drawing confidence from sociology and economics, Fernand Braudel’s foundational study of the sea, *La Méditerranée*, emphasized the collective over the individual, the structure over the event.⁸ Braudel and the other members of the *Annales* school worked to synthesize historical patterns across regions. They aspired to *histoire totale*, a history of everything, of the rules that govern all mankind. Indeed, it was precisely against the totalizing ambitions of the *Annales* schools that microhistorians aimed to recover the particular and exceptional experiences of individuals.⁹ Since Braudel, few have attempted to write histories of the sea as opposed to simply in the sea.¹⁰ Instead, the Mediterranean has become a watchword for regional studies or microhistories of connectivity, including my own scholarship. The rare exception is Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea*, which has sought to thread the needle.¹¹ They define the Mediterranean not through its unity but rather through its fragmentation—its micro-ecologies—that have forced an interdependence upon all its shores.

4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 476–77.

5. “‘Only a God Can Save Us’: Der Spiegel’s Interview with Martin Heidegger,” in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 106. See also Benjamin Lazier, “Earthrise; or, The Globalization of the World Picture,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 602–30.

6. Against Heidegger, Hans Blumenberg continued to defend the emancipatory potential of the global, or what he called, the post-Copernican view. See his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983; orig. German ed. 1966).

7. Jeremy Adelman, “What is Global History Now?” *Aeon* (March 2, 2017).

8. Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, 3 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949; 2d ed., revised and augmented, 1966).

9. Edoardo Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici* 35, no. 2 (1977): 506–20, at 512. See also Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011).

10. For the distinction between “history in” and “history of” the Mediterranean, see Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

11. Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*.

Rather than questions of scale or method, the tides of global and Mediterranean history reflect a strife between contingency and structure, between relativism and universalism. More fundamentally, they reflect competing philosophical and moral questions of the nature and possibilities of human community. Seen in this way, the ebbs and flows suggest that ongoing appeals to connectivity and interdependence will do little to alleviate the tension. After all, whether one calls it connected, Mediterranean, world, or global history, any study of interaction at any scale will confront the irresolvable knot of relativism and universalism. All studies of interaction risk simultaneously erasing and enshrining differences. For instance, when I first set out to study a world in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims met to trade goods and ideas, I had already run aground. After all, what is Judaism? What is Christianity? What is Islam? And why do they meet? Each of these terms already presumes too much. Each presumes an understanding of the relationship of individuals to community. Again, these are not problems of scale or method but, fundamentally, of philosophy, which we ignore at our own peril. Even scholars of the tideless sea are affected by the tides of global history.