In 2016, Princeton University Press published the book *What is Global History?* by the professor of global history at the Free University in Berlin, Sebastian Conrad.\(^1\) The book is a result of his research in German history and Japanese history, as well as his studies of the emerging field of global history to which, one can argue, he was propelled by the combination of his primary research fields. He previously published the German monograph *Globalgeschichte: Eine Einfuehrung* (Global history: an introduction), which was partially used but substantially changed for the English-language edition.

*What Is Global History?* starts with a panoramic overview of different intellectual and historiographic traditions that have shaped the understanding of world history. Ancient Greek, Roman, Chinese, and Arabic historians are grouped together with studies of the Enlightenment, Marxism,
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and Western Civilization. The purpose of this overview is to highlight in a long-term perspective the predisposition of historians and societies to place themselves into a larger world context as well as the fixations of these constructed “worlds” on certain core areas or subjects.

This “short history of thinking globally” allows Conrad to trace a different epistemic orientation of the current approaches that have helped shape the more recent field of global history. He singles out comparative history, translational history, world-system theory, postcolonial history, and the multiple modernities approach. Each is treated in its own right and the overall argument is that these schools helped to shape the contemporary field of global history and also endowed it with significant limitations.

The main argument of the book is that it is currently necessary to limit the scope and ambition of global history and to be clear about the methodology and normative implications of the field. Conrad argues strongly against the identification of global history with planetary coverage and a fixation on connections and comparisons. In a type of cognitive turn or constructivist argument the book presents the case for a global history to be “a distinct approach [that] explores alternative spatialities [and] is fundamentally relational and … self-reflective on the issue of Eurocentrism.”

In other words, global history should not identify the globe as the object of analysis, but should identify itself with a set of questions about context, scale, positionality, and agency.

But this “constructivist” orientation is supplemented with a focus on structured or patterned transformations that explain the uneven processes of integration in the past. Conrad argues that global history has been guilty of a fixation on links and connections that avoided the question of explaining the entanglement of the local and global in engendering historic change. He differentiates the teleological narrative of the history of globalization from the history of structured transformations or integration and argues for the need of global history as a field to focus on multilayered integration (of both causes and consequences). This integration or sustained connectedness and change may be regional or planetary in scope but would ultimately be the only way to adequately reconstruct the historical context without recourse to essentialism of locality, region, nation, or empire or in the author’s term – “internalisms.”

The “constructivist” approach to globe making and writing global history is combined in the book with an argument that multilayered integration can

2 Ibid. P. 90.

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be not only an adequate method of reconstruction of a historical context but also a return to the pursuit of explanation in the historical profession (and the preservation of history as a social science) – one that allows us “to pursue explanation up to the global level.”

The rise and ripening of the field of global history has been acutely felt in the history writing on empire. It has been less present in the field of the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. In previous issues of *Ab Imperio* various authors have explored the reasons for the relative neglect of alternative perspectives on the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, such as the postcolonial approach. Viewed as a historically formed structure, the history of empire can seamlessly morph into a version of global history by scale and ascribed connectedness. In terms of politics of knowledge one can see this pseudomorphism in the contemporary ideology of the “Russian World.”

Can the neglect of global history and the pseudomorphism of global history in our field be regarded as another version of the persistence of the Sonderweg of Russian and Soviet history? This is the question that has informed the annual theme of *Ab Imperio* in 2017. The entry point into this theme was also informed by the positionality of the suggested approach of New Imperial History, which argues for the dissociation of the perspective of historians of empire from empire as the object of analysis and hence reified structure of historical experience. This cognitive or constructivist turn in the history of empire is reminiscent of the argument advanced by Sebastian Conrad about global history as an approach and perspective. Conrad’s argument about the need for theoretical self-limitation of the field of global history poses the question of the potential heuristics of cross-examining the critique of global history and the critique of the history of empire. Other dimensions of potentially overlapping perspectives also invite attention: the tension between the hegemonic and generalizable historical concepts and variability of the experience of diversity, the macro-scale exploration of historical structures and the problem of identification of historical agency, the dialectics of history writing and the vision of the future. These are the questions that led to the interview with Sebastian Conrad that was conducted in November 2017 in St. Petersburg.

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Alexander SEMYONOV: I would like to congratulate you on the publication of *What Is Global History?* and welcome you to *Ab Imperio’s* “Conversations with Authors.” In these conversations we aim to unpack the laboratory of ideas and exchanges that shaped the book under discussion and place the publication in dialogue with the field of New Imperial History of Northern Eurasia. Let me share with you my impression, as a reader, concerning the structure of your book. I think that the structure of the answer to the question “What is global history?” is very much situated in the German intellectual tradition, and I mean the Hegelian tradition. Instead of saying that global history comes as an antithesis to national history, you are actually saying that the thesis was national history, the antithesis has already been offered in historiography (World-System analysis, postcolonial studies, comparative history, transnational history, multiple modernity school), and, so it appears, global history comes as a synthesis. So, I wonder if this is something that you had in mind and whether you still think that the opposition is between global history and national history, between the nation as a container of the past and the globe as a true scale of the past. Or is it still reasonable to think that global history is the antithesis rather than synthesis of national history?

Sebastian CONRAD: Thank you. That is an interesting reading. Probably, it would not have occurred to me myself. If you call it Hegelian it sounds ambitious and grand. The way I conceived it was modest. One of the points that I am making in that book is that global history is not one approach for every problem. It is one perspective among many but it is one, as you rightly point out, that is able to also shed new light on national history. That’s where, I guess, your reading comes from. National history is not something that needs to be overcome but something that can be better explained by taking a global view... You are right to point out that, particularly in the early 2000s, there was this very strong opposition between national histories and everything that went beyond it. And it was seen as two incompatible points of view and, in some ways, I think that still there is this conflict, especially if we look at institutions. Institutions like the universities, which teach history – there we do still have that kind of conflict. But intellectually or analytically... It is not wise to turn the competition between the national framing and the global framing into an absolute. It is not very productive. In fact, for most problems we would be well-advised to look at different scales of the human experience. For historians, it would be very sloppy to
move directly from the local to the global without taking into account that there are various ways – and spatialities – in which historical reality was formatted, shaped, and structured. So, yes, in that sense, intellectually, we need to move beyond the opposition between national history and global history. However, institutionally and, if you will, politically, this opposition will continue to be relevant, and fought over.

**AS:** You claim in the book that global history is a distinct approach, a perspective. Why is it not a distinct field? What analytical purchase does one gain by conceiving global history as an approach?

**SC:** Yes, it is a good question. It is one of the contested points of the book. You could compare my book to another recent book by Diego Olstein, *Thinking History Globally.* There he makes the opposite claim and in some ways I also sympathize with his claim. Essentially, what he is saying is that we have many different ways of writing history globally: postcolonial, comparative history, transnational history, even “Big history,” you know, from the Big-Bang to the present, and so forth. So, he identifies twelve such versions, and considers all of these approaches with their advantages and disadvantages. In his book, for example, he tells one story about Argentina in the twentieth century. And he retells that story twelve times using the approaches that are associated with global history thinking.

**AS:** So, kind of a Rosetta Stone case of looking at things from different angles, right?

**SC:** Yes, yes, absolutely. In some ways, you know, that makes sense because postcolonial studies are, in some ways, concerned with global issues and, clearly, big history would be, too, and so forth. And to some extent, these twelve approaches also share an agenda, namely, to move history writing out of the nation-state box. So, one option we have is clearly to be catholic about it, and embrace all these approaches. At the same time, what I observe now is that increasingly the label of global history gets latched onto pretty much every project that historians pursue. And often it appears to be a label only, and to indicate that apart from the country that you study, you also look at some other place. For example, you study Italy and then you refer to Kenya in your article and, suddenly, it is global. In this way, it becomes a very sloppy term, a lazy term, and, in some ways, I think there is a danger that this trend will hurt the whole enterprise: the sloppier we become, the lazier we become analytically, the more essentially irrelevant

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the global perspective becomes. In everyday usage, it is often travels and different types of connections that are associated with global history. Sometimes historians merely chart somebody’s travels to some other place and, suddenly, it is called global history. But, in my view, if we are interested in the analytical purchase of this term, we need to ask more systematically what the explanatory power of this frame and approach ultimately is. And the explanatory power really depends on defining the perspective that a historian employs as distinct from other approaches.

**AS:** I see, so in terms of the conversation within the field of global history, you are interested not so much in a distinction of the field because it is fashionable and easy these days to go global in your research, but rather in a distinction in terms of the explanatory power of the approach.

**SC:** Right! Institutionally and, again, politically I would side with my colleagues; in this case, yes, this is a broad coalition, all of us move in the same broad direction, beyond purely national histories. But analytically, I think we need to make that distinction. We need to move beyond the shallow concern with links and connections and images of other places. All of that is of course fine and interesting... But it does not explain very much. So, I think, if this field is to mature, it needs to have a more thorough reflection of what it is about methodologically.

**AS:** At this point allow me to bring the New Imperial History into the conversation. When I read the book, I thought, the positionality of your argument vis-à-vis the historiography looks very much like the New Imperial History, but it is called global history, while in the book you associate imperial history with the structuralist approach. One of the things that we wanted to articulate with the New Imperial History, and readers of *Ab Imperio* know this, is the need to go beyond the constraining nation-centered framework that, in the case of Russian and Soviet history, means both Russo-centric and non-Russian-centric methodological nationalism and even ethnicized histories. Further and more importantly, our intervention also calls for moving beyond structuralist interpretations of empire that stress a particular set of conditions or institutions or a particular ideology that is called imperial. Our counterargument runs something like this: it is multiethnic, so it is empire, or it is expansionist, so it is empire. There are other corollaries to the structuralist view of empire. It often renders empire as a strictly political or institutional phenomenon, sometimes with a dose of geographic determinism, such as in the case of the notion of the continental empire. It privileges long-termism over the short story of nationalism, and this view neglects the
plane of historical experience and historical agency. To avoid structuralist limitations in studying empire we needed two things: (1) you need a concept of the imperial situation that is positional and relational. For instance, how much do you gain from starting with the idea of ethnicity when the meaning of who is Russian varies depending on the region and depending on the social and political circumstances that are found on the ground. It follows naturally from the supposition that empires are regimes that produce diversity, so the locality and positionality of historical actors would be shifting and unstable because of the regime of production of diversity. (2) We wanted to advance a cognitive turn in studies of empire. That is, we were following Rogers Brubaker by saying that empire is not there, you know, institutionally, but is constituted by experience and practices, and they may be different from practices of collective identity that are associated with ethnicity and nationhood and are, in turn, the standard epistemology of history and social sciences. Following the historical actors as they construed their own sense of the imperial space and relations in the space of diversity, historians, we argued, may be better equipped to understand the historical experience of empire and explain the logic of historical actors. This, at the same time, allows a return to the core question of historical craft, the reconstruction of the historical context and specific historical agency, as well as the horizons of expectations and planes of experiences. I thought this was the approach that you take in your book by looking at semantics, at the concepts through which global history is made. But after that argument you come up with another argument, that of structure and structured explanations as the true domain of global history. And I wonder how the two approaches sit together.

SC: This is an interesting question. Let’s begin by thinking about the similarities between New Imperial History and global history in terms of the way in which they approach the past. So, in general I would agree: In some ways, what I say about global history, distinguishing it from older variants of world history, seems to be similar to the New Imperial History in distinction from older (and structural) variants of imperial history. So, essentially, three points. First, yes, global historians do not take “the globe” simply as something that is “out there,” as a structure, as you would say, but, in fact, they use “global” as a perspective. Second, because this structure is not simply there, it very much depends upon the positionality of the historians. It does, in other words, make a difference from where you look. The world will look very different depending on from where you write. And even in one society there will be conflicting ways of thinking about what the world actually is, and what it looks like. This dimension is also crucial.
The world, then, is not an objective scale that we can touch but, in fact, it depends on our views. And the third dimension, what you just mentioned concerns the temporality, or the long-termism that you have mentioned. Just as in the imperial history, I see a danger of essentialism that is linked to the long-termism that is present in some versions of global history. This happens when historians stipulate particular entities as lasting for centuries and even millennia, as if they were simply given. A good example is the concept of “China,” that is usually seen as continuous across centuries. But historical actors did not necessarily experience the different dynasties, with their sometimes very different geographies, consistently as “China.” In fact, one of my proposals in the book is that in order to deal with this problem, it may make sense to look at the past as slices of time and contextualize them separately – instead of postulating long continuities. So, on these three counts, I think, the two research agendas that we are comparing share quite a bit in terms of approach. Now we come to the second part of the question. Is there a form of structuralism that creeps in through the backdoor via my argument about integration …

**AS:** And how does the argument about structured explanation cohere with the general intuitions of the cognitive turn, primarily the concern with agency and epistemological hegemony?

**SC:** Well, the argument that I would make is that there is a dialectics between these two dimensions. This is clearly obvious if we think about the emergence of world and global history as approaches. There is no doubt that they are firmly tied to our globalizing present. It is very difficult to entirely disentangle that perspective from the context in which we operate, namely, an increasingly globalizing world. This is the first point: The genealogy of this approach owes a lot to the present. But let’s also think about a second point, namely, the question of how both dimensions – the “global” as an approach, and as an object of study – are dialectically linked. To begin with, indeed, global history for me is primarily an approach, it is a perspective that in theory we can apply to any problem, to any question, and to any topic. But to say that we can apply it does not necessarily mean that we should; in other words, a global approach will not always be equally productive, it will not always supply the answers to the most interesting questions. Historians therefore should always ask what the approach actually yields, and how much it can explain. And this productiveness will depend to a large degree also on something outside of the perspective and of the approach. In other words, it will depend on the degree to which we actually look at situations
that I call in my book a form of structured integration. So for example, if we look at connections, voyages or exchange of ideas, and so forth, it does make a difference whether we are speaking about one random traveler or about structured forms of mobility, such as when we have an airplane full of tourists arriving in Bali every five hours. These are patterned forms of migration and movement that have different kinds of impact. So, essentially, what I would be saying is that depending on the degree of integration, the approach of global history has more explanatory power or less. The example I use in the book is financial crises. If we talk about the 2008 or 1929 financial crises, it is very apparent that a global history approach is not only feasible but makes a lot of sense. But the more we go back in time, let’s say, the financial crisis of 1873 or the financial crisis of 1856, then we are looking at moments of crisis that were much less global! And with regard to these cases a global history approach is less efficient in explaining the dynamics and the causes of that phenomenon. So to sum up, yes, global history is an approach first and foremost, but the effectiveness of this approach, and its analytical rewards, cannot be entirely separated from the degree of global integration.

AS: Interestingly, in the book you take a strong position about the way in which historical determinism crept into the practice of global history. This is a Big and Deep dimension of global history, that often comes close to eliminating the idea of agency and subjectivity. Thinking about the field of studies of empire and the New Imperial History perspective, one can see the same tension and intellectual struggle that I have already referred to, when the return of political history, often associated with empire, signaled the return of geographic determinism and long-termist explanations. You may compare this logic in old imperial history with the Big and Deep version of global history. But you may also say that there is a family resemblance between structuralist explanations and big and deep history, especially if you take the problem of historical agency. I guess I am heading toward the question of how is it that you attack the Big and Deep version of global history and then stay with structured explanations?

SC: Again, I think it is helpful to look at the difference between the global approach and older forms of world history. Older world history tended to produce macro perspectives, macro narratives of historical change and thus tended to eliminate, if you will, individual agency but also make invisible many differences on the ground between different places. I think the first very salutary move of global historians is actually to say: what we
are doing is not necessarily writing a global biography of the planet. Global historians, in most cases, are not producing a full and worldwide history of the nineteenth century, or of the last millennium on a planetary scale. In most cases, global historians are actually looking at very concrete problems, problems that social or political historians have always focused on, but they are interested in explaining them differently, namely, by placing them in broader contexts. For example, when I was a student, there were libraries of books about German nationalism but essentially all of them treated German nationalism as something very specific. It was only German nationalism, after all, that ended up in National Socialism. It really seemed to be a very unique phenomenon. But German nationalism as it emerged in the nineteenth century looked strikingly similar to nationalisms elsewhere that emerged virtually at the same moment! So, clearly if we want to explain the emergence of a phenomenon like nationalism, we need to look more broadly and cannot limit the scope of our study to just one case but need to understand nationalism as a broader pattern.\(^5\) The global perspective allows for new answers, and also new questions – but these can be linked to very specific problems, to concrete topics, to concrete themes, and do not have to operate on a macro scale. So, this is the first part of the answer.

The second part of my reply speaks to what I see as a real danger in global history, namely, that it gets conflated with the history of globalization (in turn influenced by a normative concept of globalization). Most scholars who take a long-term view also suppose an overarching narrative, namely, the idea that there is an increasing interconnectedness, that we are speaking about an ever-growing entanglement of the world. Many historians will allow for brief stops and detours, but on the whole the assumption is that we are generally moving from less to more connectivity. In the book I try to make the case that this idea of a long-term history of globalization is misleading as soon as we take a closer look. Because, in fact, the way in which large-scale or transcontinental or transcultural forms of integration operated in the past varied greatly. In other words, we are not dealing with one unified process of the world getting evermore global, but instead we see various ways in which some of these orders are superimposed upon each other.

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To give a very concrete example: when the British conquered Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and incorporated it into the network of the British Empire, it may have looked like an instance of increasing interconnectivity; but, in fact, what really happened is that Sri Lanka was taken out of many of the local contexts in the Indian Ocean world and repositioned in the new imperial context. So, in some ways it was a move from one large network structure into a new large network structure.\(^6\) History was thus not just a move from less to more connectivity, not a simple trajectory of progressive globalization; instead, the incorporation into a new context resulted in the cutting of older connections and other links and networks. This is something we have to be very aware of … . Instead of looking at the history of globalization as a continuous structure, we should instead focus on layers of intersecting dynamics that played out on a large scale.

**AS:** This is an interesting view of how long-term historical perspective does not have a narrative in itself, but needs a narrative to become long-term. But then there is another question. You talk about the two conventional Cs of global history, namely, comparisons and connections. And you add a third C – causality in the form of structured integration. Well, one can think, going along with the cognitive side of the argument about global history, there may be a fourth C, which is contestation. One can argue that once you part with structuralism in studies of empire or global history you arrive at multiple agencies and subjectivities. And thence you arrive at rival universalisms and contestations. You are stressing the argument that the practice of global history is not about uniformity, is not about a flat world. If it is not flat, if it is uneven, do you want to put historical agency back in terms of contestation?

**SC:** This is a very helpful question that gives me the opportunity to clarify. It is important to underline that when I speak of integration, I do not in any way imply homogeneity, uniformity, and sameness. What I mean is very much a process that includes contestation at every step. If I put it in abstract terms, what I would say is that global entanglement and global integration do not necessarily lead to homogeneity; to be sure, they may bring about some form of uniformity, but at the same time this process produces fragmentation and forms of difference. This is an issue where we can benefit and learn from recent globalization theory and then in particular from works by historically minded scholars, someone like Arif Dirlik,\(^7\)


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who very forcefully made the claim that increasing entanglement in fact also produces differences. I think this is a crucial insight. In other words, when I speak of integration, it does include the forms of contestation that you have mentioned. Indeed, contestation and integration go hand in hand: You can only contest something if you are on the same plane or operate within the same framework.

**AS:** So, if one thinks about the history of empire and colonialism you see the moment of the rush to divide up the world, and the contestation of rival colonialisms and imperialism in this rush is a result of the basic common assumption that colonial empire is the sign of modernity and what is contested is who is the bigger colonial empire? So, is this the logic?

**SC:** Well, that would be one way to look at it. But what I had in mind was, for example, an anticolonial movement. Such movements pose a form of strong contestation to the colonial order by any standards. But at the same time, such contestation is already premised on the awareness that you simply cannot ignore these invaders. In the Early Modern Mughal Empire it was still possible for the court to largely ignore the presence of the Portuguese. The court was aware of their activities and recognized their power but, ultimately, the Europeans represented just a tiny fringe of the population and remained confined to a few ports, so the court essentially ignored them. There was no real contestation, not least because this was not an integrated world. This was radically different in the nineteenth century, when it was no longer possible to ignore the British, even though at the beginning they were also essentially just traders. But now the geopolitical situation had changed, and the impact of the British was very different, and as a result, various forms of contestation emerged, such as anticolonial resistance. In a way, one could say that there is no integration without contestation, and vice versa: contestation is one of the most conspicuous ways in which integration becomes visible.

**AS:** Well, some people would make an argument that taking a point of departure from the present and reflecting back on how the world was changing through connections and integration means that historians are prioritizing one type of mindset, culture, and positionality that is associated with globality and universalism or universalisms. But speaking presently, with the U.S. elections result coming out, one wonders if historians who do global history should see the overlapping of globalism with localism, which may be another form of tension or contestation. In the field of imperial studies

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8 The interview was conducted in St. Petersburg on November 10, 2016.
historians tend to work with the pair empire–anticolonial movement, but what about those who are not in cities, who are not part of modern politics and their discourses?

SC: You are raising a very important question for the field of global history. There are, I think, different answers that one could give. First, many of the movements you have in mind – you mentioned the U.S. elections, but we can include all sorts of populist backlash that we currently see in many parts of the world – are not primarily driven by people who are outside of globalization, but, in fact, their movement is a response to it. So even if some of these movements might look like they are outside of the fold of globalization, and certainly fashion themselves in opposition to it, they are, in fact, the product of it. We have already touched on the fact that historically, nationalism has frequently been a response to globalization. Second, there are nevertheless many groups that are not actively participating in globalization, at least not consciously. Here, I do not mean groups like the Hindu merchants in Gujarat (as we have just talked about the Mughal Empire), that is, a group that essentially stayed put and did not travel. But even though they themselves were not mobile, they were hardly untouched by global currents, as it was they who ran trade in the Western Indian Ocean. No, I was thinking rather of the other side of the social spectrum, of the peasants in the countryside. Many of them may not have had any awareness of global connections, and thus seemed outside the dynamics of capital. But that is of course not the case: they felt the increasing pressures of the world market as it penetrated their everyday lives. So, for example, in the nineteenth century, wheat was imported to Central Europe from Russia, from Argentina, from the United States. Even if peasants were not aware of it, at some point, they felt they could no longer make a living and decided to migrate. This simple fact of migration – a crucial feature of European history across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – must be understood as a reaction to global processes, even in cases in which this connection was not consciously made. Nevertheless, I think you are right to point out that there were places where these global connections hardly ever reached in any sustained way, and historians would be ill-advised to ignore them. Here I come to the third part of my answer. One can probably say that global historians have a tendency to focus on migration and on people on the move, at the expense of people who stay put. They tend to bracket off

or at least to marginalize the history of people who were less involved, less mobile, and less connected. Think of the fascinating study by James Scott on what he calls “Zomia,” the hillside areas in Southeast Asia. He talks about several hundred million people who essentially were able to escape state intervention, state control, and then, by implication, the pressures of global markets. For the longest time they have been ignored by historical scholarship, by national historians and globalization scholars alike. This marginalization points to a problem – there is certainly a problem if global history is only about a part of the population. The field has celebrated mobile people, travelers, translators, sailors – but there are not many global histories of peasants. This is a bias that global historians will need to correct.

AS: So, we use peasants to describe that. And that comes out a very particular historical context in which you have peasants or you think the peasants are a historical and social fact that is made possible by the analytical language that historians use. I wonder if you want to touch a little on how the analytical language of global history is still shaped by certain categories that are produced in a very particular context and then expanded globally.

SC: What do you mean?

AS: I mean describing, say, groupness and using categories of social history that are derivative of the historical context of Europe. In your book you talk about the history of the Comanche empire, and you point out the impossibility of eschewing the uniform and flat global history because the Comanche empire is called empire, their settlements are called cities, their superiors are called the elite, and so forth. So my question is where does this conversation stand in the field of global history at the present moment?

SC: That is, actually, an absolutely crucial point. In some ways, the conceptual language that we use is still the language of the social sciences as it was developed in the era of the nation-state. As you say, it was developed by using Europe as the yardstick. Therefore, the categories of class, of social status, and so forth, tend to be sedentary, they tend to be stationary due to the image of a stable society that underwrote them. Conversely, forms of social status and identity of people who are moving geographically or where social status is very volatile and flexible, are very hard to capture with

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this set of categories. What is more, these concepts typically operate on a
national level. I am sure this is particularly striking in the case of Russian
history, where heterogeneity between different places is so huge. Once we
arrive at a language that fits all these places, we tend to flatten out the dif-
fferences between them, and thus, to some extent, replace historical reality
with an ideal type. As soon as we use a particular concept it is bound to be
a generalization and abstract from specificities. This is a conundrum fac-
ing all historians, but the problem becomes even more pronounced, and in
some ways much more urgent, if we go global. Obviously, in the long run
we hope to arrive at a conceptually more sophisticated vocabulary, at a more
refined terminology. There is a big debate, and if you want we can talk about
this more, about how to do that, and how to incorporate different historical
experiences into a new conceptual vocabulary. Do we need an entirely new
language, do we need terms and concepts hailing from different contexts and
different languages? Do we need to do away with the language of the social
sciences that some scholars outside of the west now describe as essentially
imperialist? However we respond to this challenge, even if we stick to the
concepts that we have, we will need to make sure that they are less rigid and
more open to empirical cases that so far have been in some ways defined as
lying outside of that concept… Does that make sense?

**AS:** Yes, it does. And so, is this then similar to the approach of recipro-
cal comparisons suggested by R. Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz?\(^{12}\) So
instead of thinking about labor from the European perspective, one might
take serfdom as the point of departure and look at European labor from this
vantage point. Is that the kind of a trajectory that global history is entering?

**SC:** I think that would be a very interesting experiment. I am not sure
whether the Pomeranz example is helpful here, because Pomeranz in some
ways is not so much interested in this work of conceptual history. So, es-
sentially, he talks about China and England and he is not really interested in
theoretical or conceptual underpinnings of the comparison or the perspec-
tive that this comparison suggests. But let’s come back to the example that
you mentioned – labor. Yes, absolutely I do think that it would be a very
interesting field to use in thinking about terminological issues. So, we have
our notion of labor, and by “our” I mean the language of the modern social
sciences as it emerged during the European debates in the nineteenth century.

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\(^{12}\) Roy Bin Wong. *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European
Experience.* Ithaca, 2000; Kenneth Pomeranz. *The Great Divergence: China, Europe,
Interview with Sebastian Conrad

So, labor, in opposition to slavery on the one hand, and then understood as essentially free labor, as contractual labor in the capitalist system. And, of course, the more we understand the ways in which capitalism infiltrates the world beyond the West, the more it becomes clear that these categories no longer hold much water. And, in fact, the boundaries between free, unfree, indentured labor, and slavery were boundaries that proved very difficult to establish once and for all. In most cases, various forms of coercion were present in much of what we tended to describe, “ideal-typically,” as free labor. So, it increasingly becomes clear that free labor was in some ways an emancipatory utopia rather than an analytical category that could capture reality. There is now interesting work by scholars, like Marcel van der Linden and others, and also by my colleagues at the Re:work research center in Berlin.\(^{13}\) This work is going very much in that direction, namely, to turn the terms “worker” and “labor” into something more capacious and to acknowledge that a broad variety of cases in the older scholarship tended to be crossed out as not fitting the normative category of labor. And this is just one example. We can go through concepts like nation, religion, or the state, and so forth – and we will see that these categories in some ways eliminate part of historical reality, and we need to bring it back in.

**AS:** So, what has been the reception of your book so far? Can you identify lines of criticism, logics of understanding and misunderstanding?

**SC:** Well, my fellow practitioners have been very generous, and it has been a rewarding experience to discuss the book with them.\(^{14}\) But let me turn the question into a broader one: where is the idea of global history, this proposal and in some ways this project welcomed and where is it received with criticism or apprehension? So, in East Asia, for example, in China, Japan, and Korea there is a lot of openness, a lot of interest. At the same time, many historians there insist that there are local, let’s say indigenous variants of global history. Historians in these countries want to make sure that their trajectories and forms of history writing also enter the discussion. In other places the reception is different and more ambivalent. I gave a series of talks in India earlier this year. Many colleagues there were worried that global history might be another version of imperialist scholarship; is global

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\(^{14}\) For example, see the review by Serge Gruzinski in the Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/21/history-can-no-longer-be-viewed-in-splendid-isolation-what-is-a-global-historian.
history not a new form of intellectual imperialism? For a long time, Indian history had been related to Britain within an imperial framework. Now that historians are moving away from this bilateral (and imperial) framework, global historians come along and seem to tell them: “You need to integrate the national past into some larger framework.” The “global” is then perceived as a new form of empire – or at least this was an impression that I frequently had after talks in India. Then, if you move to Latin America, this whole debate about transnational or global perspectives is not institutionally established so far. Yes, of course, many Latin American countries see themselves as part of the Atlantic world, but the urge to move beyond this framework is not very manifest. And it seemed to me that for many colleagues in these countries, these perspectives are not opening up interesting questions for them.¹⁵

**AS:** What about the United States?

**SC:** On the one hand, in the United States the debate about global history is the most sophisticated and advanced. It is the place where global perspectives have been institutionalized the most, where global historians have full positions, and also where you have very prominent representatives of the field. At the same time, you can also encounter an argument that I have also encountered in continental Europe, namely, that global history has taken away from our national history. In particular, you can hear this argument among historians who study U.S. history. It was interesting to see the degree to which there is still a reserved attitude, if not strong skepticism. Yes, there are some, like Thomas Bender or Paul Kramer, who are very open to these kinds of ideas.¹⁶

In some cases, this is because they themselves worked on, for example, American empire, so it seems sort of a logical expansion. But in many cases there is still that concern that we are losing the local, we are losing the specific. I understand this concern. And absolutely, we should not lose the specificity of different places. For example, in the MA program that we run in Berlin,¹⁷ we try to emphasize and to encourage our students to select

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one place that they want to study most. So, they take all these global classes, but in the end we are urging them: “use the place that you know best, study that in detail and with the languages that are needed, write your thesis on this particular place.” So, specificity is really dear to my heart. I don’t want to create a caste of global historians that fly high and above.

**AS:** And the last question. Again coming from the New Imperial History. What kind of normative effect is there to the approach you argue for and how may it be received in places with different historicity? For example, the collapse of the Soviet Union was very much accompanied by the idea that, finally, we are completing the trajectory to the nation-state and, finally, we have national independence. Some of the problem that the European Union is experiencing nowadays may be traced back to this historical juncture. You are telling us to be global and cosmopolitan, but wait, we are lagging behind and we are just completing a path toward being a sovereign nation-state. This political idea was accompanied by historical writing in which you register absolutely excessive abuse of the category of nation and national history. In part, the New Imperial History came at this juncture of realization of the deficit of intellectual and political emancipatory potential of the category of nation. At which point the history in its estranging function, namely, by showing different historic mindsets and subjectivities, can produce both a criticism of present-day normative visions and new horizons of the future. So, does rethinking of the past in the practice of global history produce a new horizon of the future? And what kind of estranging effects or effects of defamiliarization can global history offer?

**SC:** Yes, a very good question. You are right to point out that in many places, some postsocialist countries among them, there is a strong resistance to this kind of approach. Many people want to read about and learn more about national trajectories. And, clearly, also where I come from, in Germany, we do have, for example, publishers that love publishing biographies of German politicians and statesmen, or books on important moments in the German past. But my sense is that if I speak normatively, and also beyond the academy, we will need other, nonnational histories, and there is also an audience for it. For instance, my children are growing up in a globalizing world, different from the world of my generation. They see interactions and globalization as a context that they need to understand. Our schools and also universities would be ill-advised not to help the new generation to understand their role in the present, and for that purpose you need global perspectives. And if I put this very normatively, I would say it is also one
of our tasks to teach students in schools and universities to become integral members of that world, in some way, citizens of the world. I realize that this very normative – in particular as my scholarship is usually very non-normative. But in some ways, yes, I think global history is important not only because it helps us to understand the present better but also because we need to contribute to the world as cosmopolitan citizens of it.

AS: This is about the present. But what about the links between the past and the future?

SC: In some ways one of the functions of global history would be to provide a critical commentary on the history of globalization. It is important that historians do not simply celebrate global connections, but critically assess the hierarchies and the power that went into the making of the modern world. In addition, some historians have begun to explore paths not taken, alternative experiences that were truncated and discontinued. Some the interesting studies in global history today are about such potential turning points, about the paths not taken. For example, there is the debate about whether the nation-state was, after all, the one and only format of modern statehood – or whether there were alternatives and competing visions.18 The same exploration is going on in regard to the period of decolonization.19 So, these versions of global history make us theoretically aware of alternatives to what otherwise may appear as an almost natural process. Similarly, what now looks like an almost law-like development, namely, increasing integration under the label of globalization, is man-made and is a result of human choices. It is also based on power and, sometimes, on violence, but there is no irrefutable logic with only one outcome. And when globalization enters into a crisis mode, this kind of global history that is looking for alternatives and paths not taken may be opening our thinking about alternatives in the future.

AS: Thank you very much and we will be very much looking forward to the Russian edition of your book.


SUMMARY

In November 2016, Alexander Semyonov interviewed Sebastian Conrad, the author of the book *What Is Global History?* that was published by Princeton University Press in late 2016. Conrad is known for his publications on the history of German nationalism and colonialism and on Japanese historiography, as well as for his studies of the emerging field of global history. The interview focused on Conrad’s recent book, which offers an overview of the rapidly evolving field of global history and attempts to avoid equating global history with all-encompassing research. To this end, Conrad explores the specificity of global history as an approach aimed at restoring the context of historical processes. The cognitive or constructivist turn in global history announced by the author allows for meaningful comparisons between the logic of this field’s evolution and the development of New Imperial History. Conrad discusses the intellectual genealogy of the book, the problem of supplementing his “constructivist” orientation with a focus on structures, and he answers questions about the problem of historical subjectivity as perceived by different currents within global history. He also reflects on the first responses to the book by colleagues from different countries.

Резюме

В ноябре 2016 г. Александр Семенов взял интервью у Себастиана Конрада, автора книги “Что такое глобальная история?” (*What Is Global History?*), вышедшей в издательстве Принстонского университета в конце 2016 г. Себастиан Конрад известен в современной историографии своими публикациями по истории германского национализма и колониализма, истории исторической мысли в Японии, а также о теоретических проблемах нового поля глобальной истории. Книга, послужившая отправной точкой для интервью, является обзором стремительного развития поля глобальной истории и попыткой уйти от отождествления глобальной истории с всеохватностью исследования. С этой целью Конрад обращается к выявлению специфики глобальной истории как определенного подхода и взгляда на контекст исторических процессов. Конструктивистский, или когнитивный, поворот в исследованиях глобальной истории, провозглашаемый автором в книге, делает интересным сравнение логики эволюции поля глобальной истории и поля Новой имперской истории. Конрад рассказывает об интеллекту-
альной генеалогии книги, рассуждает о проблемах балансирования между теоретической позицией конструктивизма и структурным подходом, отвечает на вопросы о проблематизации исторической субъектности в рамках различных подходов к глобальной истории, а также рассказывает о первых опытах обсуждения книги коллегами в разных странах мира.