

GEOGRAPHIES OF GLOBAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The paper, focusing on the pivotal spatial rethinking in global history, briefly reconstructs some implications of the assumption of an original spatial perspective in the global historical research from its beginnings to nowadays. The application of a constructivist perspective leads, on the one hand, to the choice of units of analysis basically alien to any form of centrism and to the hierarchies of meta-geographies; on the other hand, to the deconstruction of the traditional nation-state frame, historicized and reconceptualised in new ways in a global perspective. Moreover, after a rich debate developed in the years 2006-2015 about issues of space and scale, new life has come to global history through a more accurate empirical research, devoting more attention to contexts, social actors and primary sources.

Keywords: Spatial Turn, Regional Spaces, New National Histories, Microhistory, Social Actors.

Space is undoubtedly a central category in the context of global history. It is actually connected to one of its distinguishing features because global history aims, as well as to free itself from a Eurocentric perspective, also to reason outside the spatial framework that has long prevailed in the field of historical analysis, namely the state-nation one. Since its inception, global history has searched for spatial frameworks alternative to this unit of analysis, favouring spatialities that develop transversally to the national political-institutional scenario, traced from time to time by the processes being analysed: migrations, diasporas, circulation of ideas, ideologies, knowledge, political models, commodity chains, exchanges of objects, bacteria, diseases but also perceptions, imageries, memories. Therefore, connections design the spatial frameworks of analysis of the global history.

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For these reasons, application to historical analysis of the suggestions of the ‘spatial turn’ movement can certainly be considered one of the most consolidated points of global history. Inspired initially by the theoretical reflections of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, this movement has directed renewed attention to the spatial dimension in the social sciences. Through the work primarily of exponents of critical geography, such as David Harvey and Edward Soja, the spatial turn claimed the centrality of space as an analytical category, so that, from an inert and simple background of the processes being analysed, it would become considered primarily as a social, cultural, political product (Warf-Arias 2009; Middell-Naumann 2010).

Global history undoubtedly made a notable contribution to the rethinking of the space category which, following this movement, has affected the historiography of recent decades. Absolute Cartesian space has been reconceptualised as inconceivable independently of social action, by which it is constantly produced. This constructivist perspective has therefore made a sharp break with an essentialist view of spatiality which had given rise, on the one hand, to a ‘spatial determinism’ in which physical space is conceived as a generator of historical phenomena, and on the other, to ‘methodological territorialism’, based on an extreme rigidity of the spaces, taken as independent data from the phenomena analysed (Langthaler 2012). But what are the implications of this constructivist perspective based on a relational conception of space?

Firstly, units of analysis of historical inquiry become frameworks corresponding to the subnational, transnational or macro-regional processes that represent the focus of the research. The spaces of the global history are therefore profiled as much more fluid than politically defined territories. On closer inspection, they present the characteristics that Daniel Nordman has recently attributed to ‘space’, distinguishing it from the ‘territory’ and describing the former as “*indifférencié, incomplètement structuré, traversé par des courants d’échanges, occupé par des réseaux de villes, des constellations fluctuantes, économiques, sociales, religieuses, culturelles*”, where the latter is “*enjeu d’une institutionnalisation, d’une appropriation, d’un pouvoir*” (Nordman 2015: 698). Responding to the spatiality described by Nordman appear the scenarios reconstructed in the texts devoted to the theme of Great Divergence (Pomeranz 2004; Bin Wong 1997; Frank 1998; Parthasarathi 2011), in those focused on the Atlantic space – from the pioneering studies by Curtin and Crosby (1969, 1972) to the most recent analyses by Morelli (2013), Thornton and DuPlessis (2012, 2015) – in the revolutionary studies on the Indian Ocean (Abu-Lughod 1989; Chaudhuri 1990) or in those that have identified a space composed of fractions of five nations of Southeast Asia, called Zomia, on the basis of the rejection of the state by mountain inhabitants (Scott 2010). However, paths of exchange and *métissage* have been recon-

structed also in the context of institutional structures, provided they do not coincide with national frameworks, for example in the case of the Catholic monarchy at the centre of Serge Gruzinski's book (2004) or of the numerous imperial contexts analysed in the perspective of global history.

Common to the spatial horizons of the global history, however, has always been the tendency to problematize the category of space and the consequent opening of scenarios tendentially alien to any form of centrism and to the hierarchies of metageographies, also undermined by the connected recovery of the non-Western countries outside crystallized visions such as the Westernization of the world and the European miracle. The most recent works of global historians show a marked continuity on the methodological level with this original line of inquiry, exploring new possibilities disclosed by what has also been simply called 'spatial history'. Among the many possible examples, the experiment, launched in 2015, of the *Global Food History Journal*, in which the focus is on the circulation not only of food but also of habits and food models at the origin of creative exchanges and hybrid gastronomic cultures, appears particularly interesting. Moreover, also in this case the space displacement contributes to overthrowing pre-constituted hierarchies. A recent article by Matthjis Kuipers (2017), devoted to the cuisine of the Dutch East Indies, has shown the appropriation by the Dutch of an Indonesian culinary model, the rice table, which, more than being adapted to the tastes of the colonizers, was imbued with new symbolic meanings whereby, for example, ordinary food became a ritual to be reserved for special occasions. The process testifies to the survival of an indigenous food model under the wave of Europeanization that involved the territories in the early twentieth century. It was not, however, pure survival. As said, the result was a hybrid gastronomic culture in which the social values of the settlers overlapped with the Indonesian dishes, so that, after 1945, this food culture became an important element of identity within the Dutch homeland.

Another interesting example is provided by the recent texts focused on the 'Pacific' space, the oceanic expanse most recently explored by global history. The publication between 2013 and 2014 of four major works focusing on this area (Iglar 2013; Buschmann et. Al. 2014; Armitage et al. 2013; Douglas 2014) called for reflection on the role of the Pacific in global history (Hellyer 2016). Covering a time-span between 1500 and 1800, although with very different settings, the texts share reconsideration of the role of Europeans and Americans in the history of the Pacific that, in a global perspective, is extremely underestimated. Firstly, in the Pacific Ocean an imperialism developed which, although it proved undoubtedly beneficial for the colonizers, did not have great expansive impetus and was characterized by extreme dependence on the locals as mediators. Moreover, a strong role of

containment of the West was played by the Asian countries, whose weight on Pacific history remained central. One thinks, for example, of the influence that the tastes of Chinese consumers, and in particular the demand for sea otters, exerted on the economy of the Pacific 'world' between the 18th and 19th centuries. The term 'world' in relation to this ocean would tend to underline the interconnection of the oceanic regions and to emphasize the focus on the aquatic space in terms of "place of movement and transits" (Hellyer 2016: 301).

The very choice of the term 'world' is part of that construction of fluid spatial frameworks typical of global history. Another pregnant word, deployed in global history since its beginning, has been 'region'. This term does not necessarily refer to macro-regions. As Paul Kramer has made clear, it can define spaces "from just-larger-than-local to the multinational and continental" (2012: 201). What characterizes the regional space is rather the emphasis on the historical production of places through political and social processes, with attention also focused on mental maps, and therefore on the processes related to perception and imagination. Of course, the concept of the region had already been introduced by the *Annales* school – in particular, by Fernand Braudel – whose global history undoubtedly collects the legacy. It had been (and still is) also a key concept for regional history, which activated an interesting dialogue with global history starting precisely from the difference between a *Land* as a strictly defined space and a *Région* conceived as a product of relationships (Editoriale 2012).

The implications of adopting a constructivist perspective in the historiographical field can also be grasped on a second dimension, namely in the deconstruction of the traditional unit of analysis of the nation-state, whose formation processes are historicized. In this way, the nation-state emerges as a spatial formation of a constructed and contingent nature, to be conceived, like other spatial entities, as a construct rather than assumed as an ahistorical and natural unit of analysis. It also becomes significant to analyse the relationships between the political-administrative spatial formations, including the nation-state, and extra-institutional spatialities, in order to understand how social actors moved among multiple geographies, in the past as today, thus also relativizing the experience of contemporary globalization and the alleged crisis of the state connected to it.

In this way, the rethinking of space also makes it possible not to expel the nation-state from the search for global history – as it seemed to be in the beginnings – but instead recover it in different ways. In the first place, it is essential to reconstruct the coexistence, in different historical phases, of various spatial structures, even in the period to which the apogee of the process of territorialization in the framework of the nation-state, namely the 19th century, has traditionally been ascribed. In this sense, the current

project coordinated by Matthias Middell at the University of Leipzig, “Between Reforming Empire and Nation State Territorialization: The Transatlantic Cycle of Revolutions, 1770-1830”, as well as the reflections of Osterhammel in his nineteenth-century global history highlighted, alongside the experiences of territorialization involving – though in different ways – states and empires, the persistence of “discontinuous social spaces” (Osterhammel 2014: 108). Secondly, a study of the nation-state in a global history perspective may be based on awareness, recalled by Sebastian Conrad, that both nationalism and the establishment of nation-states were the result of global processes. Regarding both the political model of the nation and its contents, it should be remembered that they were developed, starting from the nineteenth century, in a condition of dense global integration, of which contemporaries had a certain degree of awareness (Conrad 2015: 149).

Thus, reconstructing the production of nation-states through the processes of circulation of doctrines, political discourses and representations – but also of administrative practices – can shed new light on national histories. Moreover, the latter can be rewritten, in turn, from a global point of view once they have been inserted in a perspective of analysis that privileges economic processes, social networks and transnational movements and the mixed nature of certain cultural traits, rather than a completely inner paradigm aimed at leading the dynamics of national history mainly to endogenous factors. Attempts to free the nation from the narrow horizon of its boundaries by reconstructing the rest of the world within them have been recently undertaken in France and in Italy in the books *Histoire Mondiale de la France* edited by Bucheron and *Storia mondiale dell’Italia* coordinated by Andrea Giardina (2017; 2017).

On closer inspection, both sides disclosed by the adoption of the global spatial perspective emphasize human agency, adopting an actor-centred approach. This feature brings us to an extremely lively debate that has affected global history and has mainly originated from diffidence towards approaches on such a vast scale, inevitably judged as tending to generalization and the revival of a teleological and Eurocentric vision of history. The main reservations concern the risk that the specificities, the details, claimed in past decades by the historiographical trends that had in their turn tried to undermine the structure of traditional historiography – from social or gender history to the most recent post-colonial and area studies – may disappear.

Such criticisms already induced some years ago a methodological rethinking of the scale issues between the Anglo-American global historians, including Anthony Hopkins and Patrick Manning, who highlighted the importance of privileging a point of view located at the crossroads between the global and the local. Another form of correction was put forward by the *histoire connectée*, which found particularly successful expression in the

works of Serge Gruzinski (2004) and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2005) and which made it possible to build broad stories firmly anchored to the specific contexts that they intended to analyse.

More recently, however, given the perplexities related to generalization problems, poor adherence to historical contexts, loss of specificity and limited recourse to primary sources attributed to a “supersized history” (Sebouh 2013), it has been recommended that global history should intersect with microhistory. Significant among the proposals is the genre of ‘global micro-stories’ understood as ‘global lives’, which, as theorized in an article by Francesca Trivellato (2011), has mainly materialized in the form of individual biographies in global contexts which use individual biographical paths as lenses through which to look at intertwining and global exchanges. Of particular relevance also appears the proposal put forward in a recent essay by Christian De Vito, who has proposed a declension of global history in terms of “micro-spatial history” (2015). His proposal consists of an interpretation of global history that avoids its equivalence with widening the geographical scale and identifies it with an essentially methodological perspective. ‘Global’ does not therefore indicate an expansion of analysis frameworks, but explicitly expresses the spatial rethinking of global history. In the context of this global history, understood as spatial history, the microhistory approach makes it possible to reconstruct the connections between different contexts, whose singularity is recognized and reconstructed through a direct relationship with the primary sources. This methodological proposal, which presents several points of contact with the reflections of Angelika Epple (2012), has recently found complete application in the research gathered in the book that De Vito edited with Anne Gerritsen, *Micro-spatial Histories of Global Labor* (2018).

Beyond the specific reference to microhistory, one gains the impression that this debate, developed mainly in the years 2006-2015 – revitalizing the more general methodological reflection on historical discipline – has now left room for more accurate empirical research, giving new life to global history. Thus, without necessarily resorting to microhistory, the most recent global history research shows greater attention to the contexts of which it analyses connections, also favouring an approach focused on social actors. An example to cite in conclusion is the recent book devoted to the “Mediterranean diasporas” (Isabella and Zanou 2015), in which the geographies of nineteenth-century liberalism, as the result of a syncretic construction based on the exchange and circulation of ideas, are reconstructed among multiple ‘Mediterraneans’ also through individual biographical paths, constituting an illuminating example of reconciliation of spatial turn methodologies in a global perspective with fundamental elements of traditional historiography.

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