

Writing Global History (or Trying to)

Abstract: Writing global history confronts the historian with a series of challenges, some new, some (on closer inspection) quite familiar. This article examines several of the more obvious of these and attempts to explain how far the author took them into account in constructing an account of world history over the longue duree in *After Tamerlane: the rise and fall of global empires 1400–2000* (2007). It also presents a necessarily brief summary of some of the criticisms that the book's reviewers have made.

Key Words: Global history, national history, European imperialism, decolonization, globalization

Global history has come into fashion. But how to write it remains a difficult question. In one sense of course, global history has been there all the time if only by default. Much of what has been written as local, national, economic, social or cultural history, and usually set in one place, country or continent, makes implicit assumptions about what is, or is not, going on in the rest of the world. Accounts of cultural or technical innovation, changes in governance, or religious belief typically imply that they are unique or exceptional, the product of particular conditions or circumstances specific to one region, locality or state. Yet all too often, this implied claim is made without any discussion of whether what seems at first sight unique had parallels in other societies or in other parts of the world. Cumulatively, this amounts to an unspoken assertion: that in the rest of the world, change or progress of the kind being described had failed to happen, or was happening on a scale too minor to notice. This failing, no doubt, is common to all countries and cultures. Its prevalence in the West is all the more visible because of the intense preoccupation with our national histories and the extraordinary productiveness of generations of writers. Perhaps its roots lay not so much in the urge to compare the West positively against the East (as Edward Said believed) but in the need to explain why the West

had changed so quickly. But in the rest of the world, this casual indifference to non-Western history as the static backcloth to European achievement, has been seen as the reprehensible counterpart to Europe's imperialism.

The modern turn towards a self-conscious global history should be seen in part as an aspect of decolonization. This is not decolonization as simply a transfer of sovereignty – the emasculated version often employed by Anglo-American writers – but decolonization as the geopolitical, ideological, economic, cultural and demographic transformation in the relations between the West and what was once called the 'colonial', 'semi-colonial' or 'third' world. Decolonization discredited the unthinking presumption that the non-Western world was passive and stationary. It also created (both at home and in the West) a demand for 'new' histories, in which the rise of non-Western states and nations would be explained and celebrated. For obvious reasons these were bound to challenge Eurocentric versions of world history, and assert new claims, some plausible, some not, for the cultural and economic achievements of pre-colonial and non-Western societies. One important consequence of this was the historical 'discovery' of a crowd of new actors whose place on the stage Eurocentric 'colonial history' had ignored or disparaged: preachers, peasants, petty traders, merchants and school-teachers, as well as vernacular writers and journalists. Recruited at first merely as extras in the new national histories, their claim to attention was often advanced by internal divisions within post-colonial polities, and the disappointing results of sovereign status. Histories from below, and not just of the rise of the new national elite, began to be written.¹ Comparing the fate of these 'subaltern' groups in different parts of the world became easier to do; the apparent similarities suggested that all or most had been subject to 'systemic' (ie global) forces, not local patterns of dominance. Here was one seed for a 'global' view of world history. The second (and more vigorous) followed soon after.

'Globalization' is a slippery term, and we could debate its precise meaning at length. It may be usefully thought of as: the appearance of a single global market, including (perhaps especially) in the supply and demand for capital, credit and financial services; the intense interaction of states however geographically remote; the deep penetration of cultures by globally organized media; the huge scale of migrations and diasporas, creating globe-wide networks and connections that parallel the effects of the European out-migrations of the nineteenth century; and the dramatic resurgence of China and India as manufacturing powers as part of the economic mobilization of Asia. In its recognizably modern form, it coincided with (and was no doubt both cause and effect of) the collapse of the 'socialist' system in both Asia and Europe between 1979 and 1989. In the course of a decade, one immensely powerful perspective on world history – the 'inevitable' rise of revolutionary socialism – was closed down and drained of most of its paradigmatic significance.² At just

the same time, another perspective was opened. Now it appeared that the course of world history was set towards the much more intense interaction of economies, cultures and peoples. The boundaries of states had become much more porous. In a wholly capitalist world, ideology's role would be sharply reduced. The (relatively) free movement of people, goods, money and ideas, not national traditions and cultures, would be the dominant force in shaping societies everywhere. The barriers against such global exchanges were at best counterproductive.

It is easy to see why this new view of the present encouraged a new view of the past. It suggested that in their intense concentration on the story of nations and the building of states, historians had overlooked a far vaster stream of human activity flowing across and around the national units into which world history had been conventionally divided. Indeed, it seemed very likely that, for many life purposes, sovereign frontiers were of little importance and 'national' identities a convenience to be used or ignored as circumstances allowed. In their spiritual, commercial and cultural lives, communities might have closer connections with peoples and places on the other side of the world than with 'fellow-citizens' in their national polity. They might be more influenced by religious ideas, notions of taste, patterns of leisure, and even items of diet imported from distant cultures than by those that were 'home-grown'. Perhaps in the past, as well as the present, the individual was freer to fashion his or her own set of preferences than older histories implied. Perhaps he belonged as much if not more to 'transnational' communities like the 'Atlantic World' or the 'Indian Ocean World' than to any territorial or nation-state unit. Perhaps the real history of the world was to be found in such 'voluntary' associations of mutual attraction, beyond the coercive control of the 'traditional' state.

The global history being written in the early twenty-first century thus represents a convergence of two 'revisionist' schools. The first was the product of decolonization. It insisted that historians take seriously the historical complexity of the non-Western world, explore its source materials rigorously, and reconstruct the past of non-Western societies with the same kind of rigour as had long been accorded to Western. But its real message ran deeper. The end of European domination in both its formal and informal modes revealed the limitations from which it had suffered. It focused attention on the internal dynamics of once-colonized societies. Above all it suggested that the balance of the world had been changed. The influence of non-Western states had to be taken more seriously and the 'black legend' of their past ('imperialist' histories that stressed their barbarism, chaos and economic stagnation) challenged and refuted. In the new 'world of nations', all states had the right to have their history treated respectfully, and with an objective professionalism that excluded the racist assumptions of the colonial age. The history of Europe could no longer be 'central'. The presumption that Europe was 'active' and the rest

of the world 'passive', or that European versions of other peoples' pasts should be given authority, were discredited dogmas of the age of imperialism. Instead Europe should be 'de-centred', or even 'provincialised' in the new post-colonial, post-imperial history.³ The second, and more recent, seeks to combine this correction with a much heavier stress on the mutualities and reciprocities of culture and trade, the fluidity of movement by migrants and sojourners, and the freedom enjoyed by individuals and communities to fashion their identities and resist the power of the state to impose one upon them.

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Before we turn to the question of how global history can be written, it might be well to take note of some of the obvious risks that new histories of this kind inevitably run. The first and most familiar is that of teleology. If the world is now globalized, then it is tempting to think that it was bound to be so. Like historians of nationhood, who scabbled for every last scrap of vaguely plausible evidence that their nation was 'born' at some remote time in the past, historians of the 'global' may see the migrants, traders and travelers of the early modern world (or earlier) as free-spirited protagonists of our cosmopolitan values. We might be persuaded to see the world's economic history as the inevitable advance towards a single 'global' economy, and resistance to it as a futile struggle against 'progress'. We might treat the history of nation-building with the same condescension as a wrong-headed – perhaps even wicked – endeavour that led the world into war. Secondly, we might be seduced into partisanship. There is such obvious merit, we might think, in stressing the global at the expense of the national, the value of openness in economics and culture, and the foolishness of denying both external influences and mutual dependence, that our global histories should become a record of saints against sinners, in which the motives of those who champion local particularisms – economic, religious or cultural – are inevitably suspect. Thirdly, we may fall into the trap of exaggeration, and commit in reverse the same crime as the 'national' historians. Where they denied the 'external', saw no foreign influence, or insisted upon fixed national identities, the 'global' historian might be tempted to claim too much for the 'global', focus exclusively upon non-local actors, and celebrate the 'trans-national' without a real test of its strength. In a fierce recent critique, the Canadian historian Ian Steele denounced the version of 'Atlantic history' put forward by the leading American historian Bernard Bailyn as little more than American history writ large, a variation on the old and discredited theme of 'American exceptionalism', in which the European empires were left out in the cold. Yet on any realistic view, European empires remained a massive presence in the Atlantic world deep into the twentieth century.⁴

The fundamental problem, perhaps, is that it is not easy to see where global history can be 'centred'. As Pamela Kyle Crossley points out, there is no global 'archive' to which the historian can turn.⁵ The conventional methods of historical scholarship are thrown out of gear. Even if they know several archives quite well, for global historians these will amount to a few insignificant drops in a vast sea of knowledge. For all the rest they must rely on the learning of others, picking their way through a mass of secondary literature, uneasily conscious that much information is only available in languages that they do not command. To some extent, it should be said, this problem is not unique to global history. The range and depth of historical investigation within many 'national' histories has long since passed the point where the individual historian can hope to be expert in more than one limited sector of 'national' experience. He or she must nevertheless locate a specialized study into the political, social or cultural history of a particular group, a particular place and a (usually) quite short period of time within a much longer chronology and a much larger society. Dependence on a critical reading of other historians will be just as important, although somewhat less onerous, than for the global historian. But the problem remains: from what angle of vision should the global historian attempt to interpret the globe? Indeed, what are the 'sectors' – both thematic and chronological – into which global history should be divided? What are the 'grand themes' around which it should be discussed and debated?

Thus far, it would seem, global historians have made a number of choices. One option has been to concentrate upon those 'macro' forces that seem beyond human control, but whose impact on global history would be hard to deny. Histories of climate change, of the environmental consequences that followed, or of epidemics and disease, appear classically global: they circumvent the sensitive issue of where the source of change lay, of who was active and passive, and of who was to 'blame' for their unwanted results.⁶ But only up to a point. What makes the history of climate change interesting is not so much the increase or decrease of temperatures, rainfall or sea-levels, but the human and social response. Why did some societies cope more successfully than others with environmental dangers and stresses? How far was the social response to the threats posed by climate – such as drought and famine – determined by rulers who sought to serve their own interests? Were the destructive effects of climatic instability on the survival of peoples magnified by the callousness or dogma of alien masters – the case advanced by Mike Davis in his searing analysis of the British failure in India to prevent mass death from famine.⁷ Where changes of land use, or the destruction of forests, or the arrival of new species, were the agents of environmental degradation, the question of who was 'responsible', and who were the 'victims' is very hard to avoid. The very capacity to engineer change of this kind was often the product of technological skills, and thus a projection of the power of

one society over another. While the forces of nature set certain limits to all human endeavour, it is the apparently wide variation in the human capacity to evade or exploit environmental constraints that is historically interesting.

A second option has been to evoke a new 'ecumene', or (as we've seen) a set of new 'worlds' – Mediterranean, Atlantic, Indian Ocean and other. At first sight these approaches seem similar, but there is an important difference between them. In the hands of William McNeill⁸ or Marshall Hodgson, the ecumene was a global community across which ideas were exchanged and people and goods moved. But they moved in ways that ignored modern borders, and reflected patterns of power, influence and wealth that the modern world has lost sight of. The connections between the different parts of the ecumene – Eurasian or Afro-Eurasian – its centres of gravity, economic, religious and political, the mutual influences between them and the shifting balance of strength to be seen over time, become the key historical issues. It was a vast work of imaginative recovery, but which, inevitably, relegated some parts of the world to an outer periphery, with few links if any to the ecumenical centres. By contrast, the scale of the new 'worlds' is considerably smaller. Those that historians have tended to favour have usually been 'thalassic', clustered round a sea, or bonded together by seaborne communication.⁹ The historian's purpose is to discover and document (sometimes by artifacts or archeological evidence) the 'connectivities' between maritime zones hundreds – perhaps thousands – of miles apart but crucially dependent on each other's resources (or manpower) and vitally influenced by each other's cultural production.¹⁰ What this is meant to reveal is that economies, cultures and polities – and perhaps also religions – are hardly ever the product of autonomous or autochthonous development. Instead they are built, or emerge, from a complex inter-action between different elements, from the creation of networks of merchants and migrants, from the pathways of pilgrims, and the diffusion of faiths – each of them shaped, in some part at least, by the natural world: its winds, currents and seasons. Such new 'worlds' history can be immensely revealing. But it is not without difficulties. Deciding their limits, which change over time, is an imprecise business. Detecting how far inland their influence extends, and how important it is, is also a problem. In early modern South Asia, for instance, two such 'worlds' rubbed against each other: the 'Indian ocean world' and the 'Indo-Iranian', whose culture dominated North India.¹¹ There is also the danger that in stressing so much the role of exchange and mutual dependence, the balance of power and wealth in these 'worlds' will be overlooked.

A third kind of approach has been to focus instead on the trail of consumption. Here the historian is concerned less with regions and 'worlds' than with the production, distribution and sale of commodities: silk, cotton cloth, precious metals, ceramics, warhorses, elephants, coffee, maize or wheat. To follow the spoor of

traded commodities is to find the material connections that bound people together. It may also allow us (if we can find out the prices) to deduce the prestige that such items enjoyed and glimpse the cultural shifts that their consumption implied. It may throw some light on the scale and speed with which economies changed in response to technological novelty, and to the varying impact of Europe's industrial production on the non-Western world. Sometimes the results may surprise. Tracking the sale of Indian-made fabrics has revealed the extent to which even in the mid-eighteenth century, India had the best claim to be the 'workshop' of the world. It was the struggle to match the design of its textiles, as well as their cheapness and quality, that spurred British manufacturers into their quest for new methods.¹²

Lastly, these kinds of approach have encouraged historians to mount a series of challenges to what were until recently the conventional 'truths' of modern world history. The most radical challenge dismisses the old notion that Europeans created a global economy from the maritime mastery they forged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A global economy appeared at that time, argued Andre Gunder Frank in *ReOrient*,¹³ but it was centred on China not Europe. It was China that had a huge commercial economy and China that needed the bullion produced in America to supply the monetary medium that commercial expansion required. Without China's growth, and the price it was willing to pay for imported silver, the Europeans' drive to colonize the Americas might have faltered or stalled. This kind of argument was extended, in a modified form, to propose a revision of the causation and chronology of the 'great divergence' between the economic performance of Europe and Asia. Not until after 1800, argued Kenneth Pomeranz, in his much admired study, did geological luck (access to cheap coal) and the fruits of predation (the stolen acreage of colonies) allow Western Europe to outstrip the powerhouse of the Chinese economy in Jiangnan. Needless to say, both these 'revisions' have been fiercely contested.¹⁴

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In setting out to write the book that became *After Tamerlane* (2007), I was at first only dimly aware of the growing scholarly literature on global history and of the intellectual and practical difficulties involved in its writing, briefly outlined in the previous section. I was influenced by the brilliant insights of Marshall Hodgson's posthumous volume *Rethinking World History*,¹⁵ and then by the extraordinary panorama opened up in his classic *Venture of Islam*, one of the outstanding achievements of twentieth century historical scholarship.¹⁶ Like so many others who encountered Braudel at an impressionable age, I was dazzled by the possibilities of a history released from the thrall of a state-centred narrative and so superbly enriched with

geographical and social detail – but equally sure that only a genius could attempt such a thing! The writings of Jacob van Leur¹⁷ – of which I was quite ignorant until a trip to the Netherlands – were another revelation of how the conventional history of European expansion could be re-imagined, in this case by a young scholar for whom the colonial world was still a reality (van Leur had composed his essays in the late 1930s and was killed in the opening phase of the Pacific War). In fact, it was only very gradually that I began to see how the historical thinking that Hodgson and van Leur represented would connect with the book that I was trying to write.

My original starting point had been the attempt to make sense of decolonization, not so much as the ‘transfer of sovereignty’ but as a phase in world history. If decolonization were defined, as I thought it should be, as a great transformation in the geopolitical, political, economic, cultural, ideological, and demographic relations between different parts of the world, then two questions arose: what new set of relations did decolonization produce? And what set of relations had ‘colonization’ embodied? It might have been wise to stop at that point. Without an almost accidental encounter with early modern European expansion, and a much older interest in Britain’s eighteenth century imperialism, I might have been tempted to do so. But it was obvious, on reflection, that to treat the peculiar path of Europe’s expansion as a given, needing no explanation, would, at the least, be a failure of nerve. It also seemed obvious that the way that expansion had happened had had a powerful effect on the general stability of the colonial ‘world order’, and thus on its ultimate downfall. Moreover, even the briefest acquaintance with the course of British imperialism was a forceful reminder that the scope for European empire-building had varied enormously in different parts of the world. Why was it the case, to take the most glaring example, that the British and other Europeans, could force their way into Africa, and impose an almost total partition on its peoples, but had no chance of doing so in the case of Qing China? If the late nineteenth-century world was not a blank canvas on which Europeans could paint their designs, what had shaped it in ways that imposed significant limits on their imperial ambitions?

By this series of somewhat grudging enquiries I found my way back to Tamerlane, or rather his death in 1405. A glance at the map had shown that for much of the eighteenth century, as well as the seventeenth, Europe’s presence in Asia had been almost entirely confined to its maritime edges. And if the Ottoman Empire had still been battering at the gates of Vienna in the 1680s, histories that proclaimed that from 1492 onwards the Qing, Mughals and Ottomans were doomed to collapse in the face of invincible Europe seemed a bit premature. The Europeans had ‘conquered’ America, or some of its valuable parts, but what difference had that made to their position in Eurasia? Travellers’ reports on the glamour and power of ‘oriental depots’ in Asia were part of the history of Europe’s expansion, but how

did state-building in Asia compare with the more familiar account of the rise of the European nation-states? Was Europe the only part of Eurasia to experience a surge in political and cultural ambition after c1400? But the enquiry had to stop somewhere. The importance of Tamerlane was that his was the last (but abortive) great venture to create a land-based 'world-empire' that spanned the whole of Eurasia. His death marked the end of a huge epoch in world history. For within a few years of his passing, the Europeans' break-out from their long, cramped confinement in the Far West of Eurasia, had *begun* to transform the entire pattern of world politics. The key question was just how fast and how far.

But the immediate question was to how to write a book to answer these questions. The obvious plan was to try to analyze the relations between different parts of the world as they changed over time, but without the prior assumption that European primacy was inevitable, and inevitably doomed in the twentieth century. That meant trying to keep as open a mind as possible about the 'performance' of different parts of the world in terms of material advance, state-building and cultural dynamism. It meant questioning the descriptions that European observers supplied so abundantly of other societies and their unflattering account of their social, economic and cultural defects. It meant looking very closely at the limits of the Europeans' influence even after they had begun their American conquests and forced their way into the maritime trade of Asia. It meant puzzling out how the small and insecure bridgeheads they had established in Asia by 1750 had grown into empires a hundred years later. It meant noting that even at the height of the classical era of European imperialism (conventionally dated c.1890–1914), Europe's world domination was far from complete. But it was also obvious that a 'revisionist' history that 'de-centred' Europe too far would be an absurdity. It was not the historical fact of European power in the world that was in doubt, but its chronology, causes, nature and limits.

Even so, to make the story even remotely intelligible required a set of what Burckhardt might have called 'terrible simplifications'. The first of these was to reconstruct the whole period between 1405 and c.2000 into eight 'conjunctures' – when the relations between different parts of the world assumed a distinctive pattern of relative power and wealth. In the first of these, I suggested that the 'great transformation' in European history, when the Renaissance and the 'Discoveries' opened its road to early modern 'modernity', was paralleled by advances in commerce and state-building in other parts of Eurasia. Far from conferring on Europe the promise of world mastery, the sixteenth century brought a huge surge of Ottoman power deep into its heartlands, while Europeans themselves were distracted by theological conflict. In the second long period between the early seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries, it seemed more reasonable to detect a prolonged equilibrium in the rela-

tive strength of Europe and the rest of Eurasia. The real turning point was to come in the eighty years after 1750: the geopolitical, economic and cultural earthquakes that I described in the book as jointly producing a 'Eurasian revolution'. It was then that the combination of a hugely expanded Atlantic economy (partly the result of intra-European conflict), technological advance in Europe's wealthiest regions, and the geopolitical upheaval in India (largely the result of internal Indian change) opened the way for Europeans to assert their authority on a scale that would have seemed absurdly improbable before 1750. But the result was not so much to confirm Europe's world-wide dominion as to begin a 'race against time' in which non-European/non-Western states struggled to match the ability of Europeans to penetrate their states and societies commercially, culturally and with military force. The result was not a foregone conclusion (as the remarkable trajectory of Japanese history reminds us). Nevertheless it seemed by the 1880s that the main European states had been able to fasten a 'colonial world order' on much of the rest of the world. Yet, it also appeared on closer inspection, that even at its (supposed) height, European domination left large spaces – geographical and cultural – uncolonized, and that even where the apparatus of European rule had been imposed (with flags and governors and 'district officers' in their khaki shorts), it created at best a 'shallow state' with scanty resources and doubtful legitimacy.

On this kind of argument, it was easy to see why, when the geopolitical conditions on which Europe's pre-eminence depended were shattered by war in 1914, and by economic disaster in the inter-war years, the frontiers of its 'colonial world-order' began to be rolled back, in East Asia especially. But it was also the case that the means to destroy it completely had not been assembled. The 'old colonial powers', Britain and France, with the United States still semi-detached, were able to fashion a new international system – the League of Nations – to preserve much of its substance. And although economic hardship and forms of cultural revival – particularly visible in British-ruled India – threatened their grip, it was not until another geopolitical revolution occurred between 1938 and 1942 that the global regime that had taken shape in the 1880s began to break up. This opened the way for the last great 'conjuncture', that of decolonization. Decolonization transformed the imperial order into something more like a 'world of nations'. But its peculiar trajectory was deeply inflected by the course of the Cold War, by superpower competition and by a global economy that was effectively partitioned between East and West. It was another huge geopolitical shock, almost entirely unforeseen – the fall of the Soviet Union and empire – that unblocked the path to a fully 'globalized world'.

This crude sketch of world history was 'global' in the sense that it saw the dynamic of historical change as deriving from the inter-action between the states, economies and cultures of different world regions. Even this required a further 'sim-

plification'. Those regions were grouped into three large 'blocs': East Asia, Islamic Middle Eurasia (including North India), and a 'greater Europe' that included Russia and (after 1750) 'Anglo-America'. Global history was shaped (this was the book's implication) by the competitive expansion of the main states and empires of these civilizational groupings, and also by their striking resilience over the best part of a millennium. Global history was also (perhaps an even more contestable claim) Eurasian history writ large. For, unlike most accounts of European expansion, the book pays little attention to Europe's colonization of the 'Outer World'. It argues instead that it was Europe's relations with other parts of Eurasia that mattered most, although it was certainly true that European control of much of the Outer World allowed it to play such a powerful role in Eurasia itself. But the pivot of world history, and the centre of gravity of its global exchanges, has been the rise and fall of civilizations and empires in Eurasia. In a much longer view, it has been the 'connectedness' of most of Eurasia – the transit of religions, ideas, goods, techniques and people from one end to the other – that has determined its history, that and the success of different cultures and states in exploiting the benefits of connectedness to increase their relative wealth and power over other parts of Eurasia.

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Of course, the question arises: how far can such an account match the requirements of global history and avoid the pitfalls discussed in the early part of this paper? Perhaps only with difficulty! It might be argued, for example, that its civilizational groupings do empirical violence to the cultural realities. How far did contemporaries in the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries recognize a European (or Christian), Islamic or 'Confucian' identity? Perhaps, in many cases, not very far. But it would not be far-fetched to see these as the most important cultural boundaries in Eurasia. It would be hard to deny, for example, that the mobility of people and ideas was far greater between different parts of Europe/Christendom or the Islamic world than it was across the cultural frontier between them. Nor that Confucian political and aesthetic values were widely accepted across most of East Asia until the mid-nineteenth century. The book also treads a fine line between the 'Eurocentricity' which global history rejects, and the futile denial that Europe was 'where the weather comes from' (in Churchill's evocative phrase) for two centuries after 1750. But it also tries hard to avoid (with how much success is for others to judge) the teleological assumption that a European (or Western) triumph was inevitable. The argument, instead, is that at a series of 'pivotal' moments, geopolitical contingency played a critical role. In the 'Eurasian revolution' it was India's precocious openness, the comparative 'modernity' of its commerce and banking, and the state-building

ambitions of its regional leaders, not the economic, technological or military superiority of Europeans that plunged the sub-continent into its crisis. The series of struggles by which India became a vast oriental colony and the centerpiece of Britain's world empire remains one of the most astounding and mysterious revolutions in world history. Thirdly, it might be thought that the book pays too little attention to the cross-cultural influences, the patterns of exchange across 'worlds', or to the mixtures and 'hybridities' that allowed individuals to fashion their own identities, against or outside the national stereotypes that global history seeks to challenge. Partly this is a consequence of the book's geopolitical bias: it would have been hard to do full justice to the flow of commodities and cultural 'products' within its structure of argument, or to bring out more fully the existence of 'global communities' outside the control of states and empires. But it also reflects the opinion I share with Professor Steele¹⁸ that while intermediary groups with ambiguous loyalties certainly existed, it is important to recognize that for most people most of the time, loyalty or obedience to their secular ruler and religious superior were very hard to escape. Indeed, the book goes so far as to argue that the history of the world has for the most part been an imperial history – a history of empires.

Perhaps this is the point to report the main criticisms that have been made by reviewers of the book. One, made by a biographer, was that the book contained too few personalities and was lifeless and dull. It is true, of course, that more biographical sketches might have enlivened the text for non-academic readers especially. But structurally, they would have added nothing and indeed might have made it even harder to keep the different parts of the book in some sort of balance. A second complaint was that I had been too selective in my choice of empires to discuss and had, in particular, disregarded the Spanish experience in the Americas. The best defense here is that the book's primary purpose was to trace the shifting balance of cultural, political and economic power across the Old World of Eurasia, and that this could only be done (practically) by describing the fortunes not of all its empires but of the principal empires in East, West and Middle Eurasia. It was also for this reason that Spanish imperialism was tangential for most of the period covered in the book.

A third kind of criticism was the definition of empire displayed in the book was unsatisfactorily vague and one reviewer went so far as to propose his own typology, perhaps as a rebuke. It might have been wiser to insert a brief section to comment on the extensive literature on the meaning of empire, if only to explain why I did not find it much help. Much ink has been spilt on assertions that empire means 'control' (whatever that means) over 'subject peoples' (whoever they are) and requires the existence of administrative 'structures', justificatory rituals and domineering ideologies to be truly 'imperial'. Much ingenuity has been devoted to distinguishing

between 'imperial' and 'hegemonic' power suggesting that only the former entails interference in the domestic politics of sovereign states. Most of these distinctions and differences were blown out of the water more than fifty years ago by Gallagher and Robinson,¹⁹ who showed among other things that the form of collaboration on which all empires depend are actually so various as to defy any simple definition. It seemed to me profitless to spend many pages struggling to decide whether the forms of rule in Safavid Iran were sufficiently similar to those of Ming or Qing China, or those of the British in India, Egypt, Kenya or New Zealand, to justify applying the term 'empire' to all of them.

Instead I fell back on the common characteristics of empires which separated them from ethnically-based states, small states, city states and modern nation-states. This was their (relative) scale; their overlapping of ethnic, linguistic, and geographical boundaries; and their effort to draw other peoples and territories into their systems (by which I mean their spatial, hierarchical and functional arrangements in politics, economics and culture) by a variety of means ranging from outright political rule to discreetly veiled influence. It was certainly a key claim of the book that throughout much of recorded history this kind of state has been the 'default mode' of political organization, and that staying out of its clutches has usually been difficult. Indeed, there is much to be said for the claim that, in any long view of world history, the tension between empires and the peoples and zones that lay just beyond their reach has been a dominant theme.

Finally, there are two different kinds of objection that both deserve notice. The first is that I fail to provide a detailed explanation of why Europe was able to draw ahead of the rest of Eurasia in economic performance. I attempted to offer a balanced account that reflected a large and sophisticated historiography. To have tried to do more – to offer new data and an original analysis – lay beyond my expertise and would have changed the whole shape of the book. Indeed, it could hardly have been done without an intense concentration on the late eighteenth century, and a rigorous inquiry into a huge database. The second was that I had failed to draw sufficient attention to the superior capacities of the most advanced early modern states in Europe on the one hand, compared with those of China on the other. This may have been partly a matter of emphasis. One of the aims of the book was to avoid the usual insistence that European states were more effective 'state actors', not least because European states varied widely in their strengths and capabilities. Perhaps this is also a place where the text would have gained from a rather fuller discussion. But I should end this resume by insisting that even a book of this length can hardly be more than an interpretative essay, to be replaced in its turn by a new formulation. I await a new overview with interest – and impatience.

Perhaps the most striking conclusions that emerge from a survey of global history over the *longue durée* are, firstly, the unexpected reversals of fortune that constantly overturned expectations of permanence. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more obvious than in the fate of empires. Of course, it has often been observed that history is a 'graveyard of empires'. Empires have always been vulnerable on a number of fronts. They depended on the collaboration or, at least passivity, of subject populations and local elites. But this was usually conditional on the wealth, strength and prestige of the imperial ruler, and on his ability to meet the expectations of his 'loyal' supporters. The strength of an empire also turned on the solidarity of its ruling elite, its ideological (or religious) glamour, the surplus it drew from the imperial economy, the military capacity to beat down any external challenge, and – crucially – the flexibility of its rulers in the face of challenge and change. To Western observers in the nineteenth century, it seemed that the surviving empires of the non-Western world, like the empires of the pre-modern past, had invariably fallen victim if not to the 'ecological' exhaustion of their agrarian economies, or the spread of new faiths, then to the 'corruption' of their ruling elites. Sooner or later, it seemed, any dominant group would 'privatize' the assets of the imperial system, diverting its wealth into their own pockets, monopolizing its military and administrative structures, transforming themselves from an open group that had risen by merit into a caste.²⁰ A vicious circle then began: subject populations were over-exploited; the revenue plundered; the army neglected; ecological 'rules' forgotten; legitimacy dissipated. In this weakened state, the empire was ripe for rebellion or capture by an aspirant power. But the European imperialists of the nineteenth century thought they would escape this fate.

This was not simple hubris. The distinguishing feature of the richest and strongest of the European overseas empires, the British, was (so it seemed) the radical difference between its imperial system and that of the 'traditional' agrarian empires. Access to the resources of a global economy ruled out any danger of environmental exhaustion. The promise of commercial growth without limit, allied with a powerful universal ideology of individual empowerment, made it easy to recruit loyal subjects and allies. Above all, an 'open' system at home averted the worst of the dangers to which empires were prone. A ruling elite, chosen (increasingly) on merit and answerable to public opinion, would have no chance to entrench its claims at the expense of the state. Freedom of thought would ensure its devotion to 'moral and material progress',²¹ and guarantee the conditions for scientific and technological innovation. And for the British, at least, with their unique geopolitical position as an offshore island with a (mainly) seaborne empire,

the risk of ‘capture’ by an enemy power was low. Yet, as it turned out, for all their advantages, the British could not escape geopolitical catastrophe. They came close in 1918 (when the collapse of Russia threatened German domination of Middle and Western Eurasia) and succumbed almost completely in 1940–42 – in defiance of all reasonable prediction.

The second conclusion is that global history should be seen as an unending series of conjunctures or phases, stretching away like the waves of the sea. Their length is uncertain and unpredictable, and veiled from contemporaries. Only one thing is certain: everything passes. As we ponder the fate of ‘globalization’ in the second decade of the twenty-first century, that may be cold comfort.

Notes

- 1 For an excellent survey, V. Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London 2000, ‘Introduction’.
- 2 A classic expression and brilliant expression is Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, London 1983.
- 3 D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2000.
- 4 I. K. Steele, Bernard Bailyn’s American Atlantic, in: *History and Theory* vol. 46 (2007), 48–58.
- 5 See P. K. Crossley, *What is Global History*, Cambridge 2008.
- 6 A criticism leveled against A. W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe*, Cambridge, 1986, and Jared Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel. A short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years*, London 1997.
- 7 Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts. El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, London and New York 2001.
- 8 W. H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: a History of the Human Community*, Chicago 1963.
- 9 See for example, M. P. M. Vink, *Indian Ocean Studies and the new thalassology*, in: *Journal of Global History*, issue 2 (2007), 41–62.
- 10 See P. Hordern and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: a Study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford and Malden, Mass. 2000; S. Subrahmanyam, *Connected Histories. Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia*, in: *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 31, issue 3 (1997), 734–62.
- 11 See F. C. R. Robinson, *Perso-Islamic Culture in India from the 17th to the early 20th centuries*, in: R. L. Canfield, ed., *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge 1991.
- 12 See the suggestions in D. Washbrook, *From Comparative Sociology to Global History. Britain and India in the Pre-history of Modernity*, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 40, issue 4 (1997), 410–444.
- 13 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient. Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley et al. 1998.
- 14 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, Princeton 2000; for a critique, P. C. Huang, *Development or Involution in Eighteenth Century Britain and China?* in: *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 61, issue 2 (2002), 501–38.
- 15 M. G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, Cambridge 1993.
- 16 M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols., Chicago 1974.
- 17 Jacob C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society. Essay in Asian Social and Economic History*, The Hague 1955; L. Blussé and F. Gaastra, eds., *On the Eighteenth Century as a Category in Asian History*. Van Leur in Retrospect, Aldershot 1998.
- 18 See note 4.

- 19 J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, The Imperialism of Free Trade, in: Economic History Review New Series, vol. 6, issue 1 (1953), 1–15.
- 20 In recent times this theory was brilliantly set out in Mancur Olson, The Rise and Decline of Nations, New Haven 1982.
- 21 The annual reports of the (British) Government of India were titled “The Moral and Material Progress of India”.