Jews, Christians, and Muslims *met* in medieval Iberia? Had I reduced the history of the Mediterranean to a matter of mere physics?

Earlier generations of historians did not ignore the horns of the dilemma. Within every turn in historiography—social, cultural, linguistic, or material—scholars have openly struggled with the very same knot. More proximately, within my own field, the problem and its pitfalls have not been lost on scholars who have engaged with postcolonial theory, Mediterranean history, or global history.[10] Reading their works again, seeing the extent of the dilemma, I felt like Flaubert at Jerusalem, as if I were the last one to arrive.

So what could I do? If I accepted the essential insolubility, as Gordon does, then I might proceed with epistemic humility. I might reject any attempt to slip the knot and accept that I can only swim in a small pool, where the problems are mercifully smaller. The problem with this concession is twofold. First, it cedes the terrain of the comparative, world, or global to other fields, some of which appear content to traffic in materialist or culturalist explanations that reduce global history to a narrative globalization. Second, the withdrawal exculpates history and historians from their roles in constituting or enabling these problems. If I could not retreat, then I had to embrace failure as a permanent condition.

What does a failed Mediterraneanist do in practice? To undertake a comparative study in the Mediterranean means to work in multiple languages, at multiple scales, and across multiple disciplines and sources. It means to combine micro- and macrohistorical practices. It means to be a fox and a hedgehog, a parachutist and a truffle hunter. This much is obvious. But more fundamentally, being a failed Mediterraneanist means to interrogate the terms that make comparison possible in the first place, to expose the pelagic prejudices that make the Mediterranean conceivable. Above all, it means to recognize that all history is always already a history of ideas. I do not mean to suggest that all historians must become intellectual historians or philosophers, but we must be prepared to offer philosophical defenses of our ideas. First, I turned to the Mediterranean to provincialize Europe and failed. Rather than retreat, I now seek to provincialize the Mediterranean and fail all over again.

Arunabh Ghosh

Reflections on Global History

My first meaningful encounter with the term "global history" occurred during shopping week at Haverford College in the fall of 1999. I had

10 For example, Bruce Holsinger, "Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique," *Speculum* 77, no. 4 (2002): 1195–1227; Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, "The Mediterranean and 'the New Thalassology,'" *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 722–40; and Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages* (New York, 2021), esp. 19.

just arrived from India, drawn to a liberal arts education that offered students the chance to study putatively unrelated disciplines—physics and history, in my case—side by side. Global history was offered to us as part of a dyad of introductory courses in the history department, the other being a course on Western civilization. When asked what he thought of Western civilization, Gandhi is famously, and almost certainly apocryphally, said to have quipped that he thought it a very good idea. Devoid of Gandhian wit, my teenage self nonetheless considered an introduction to global history an infinitely better idea, and I instinctively gravitated toward it. But what made instinctive sense, I subsequently learned, was the product of years of curricular contestation involving faculty across the United States as they sought to reform how history was taught. As a result, large schools had even begun to offer introductory courses to different world regions. A small liberal arts college could ill afford such luxuries, so a catchall intro to global history is what we got.

Early in the semester we read Jerry Bentley's classic *Old World Encounters*. Paired with Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*, it did much to inform a particular sensibility to history, one in which syncretism, connections, and mobility were key concepts. To learn about encounters between parts of the world we were not conditioned to think of together was refreshing and left a deep imprint. Even a turn during the second semester to more recent history and the darker and more somber perspectives of world-systems theory or postcolonialism, among many others, all of which highlighted the persistence of questions of power and inequality, did not altogether dilute the wholesome connotation that global history had earned in my mind.

The decentering of the nation-state and the promotion of a transnational, globalized, and deracinated ethos, while charming, was, of course, itself a product of a particular historical conjuncture. Outside the academy, it ran parallel to the increasing dominance of neoliberalism, globalization, and the (eventually deeply flawed) optimism about a less violent and less unequal post–Cold War world. Within the academy, global history naturally also benefited from long-standing debates across different intellectual traditions. The rapid cascade of 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, and the widespread reemergence of violent ethnonationalism the world over—all of these events certainly made global history appear less "wholesome." (Ravinder Kaur has written insightfully on the interconnected rise of capitalist neoliberalism and ethnonationalism.) But in many other ways it also made it more immediate and more urgent.

I begin with these autobiographical reflections because they represent my own uneven relationship with global history. What began as relatively uncritical appreciation was followed by a discomfort with what appeared to be its naïve optimism, before eventually being replaced by a greater appreciation of its methodological and conceptual purchase. Today, I understand global history largely in contra terms—as

the qualification of other more "traditional" forms of histories, be they national, regional, linguistic, racial, social, economic, and so on. In this sense, global is not a claim to any kind of spatial, temporal, or even conceptual comprehensiveness. Rather it is a call to capaciousness, to remind ourselves to constantly shift our field of vision and our depth of field, to enlarge the frame, to periodically refocus, and to consistently question our assumptions (or composition, if I am allowed one final abuse of the photographic metaphor). Doubtless this is easier to adopt as a sensibility than it is to put into practice. The wider historiographical mastery, sufficient exposure to alien disciplines, and expansive linguistic dexterity that it demands are daunting enough to address individually, let alone as a collective. I will say more on this below, but for now it remains important to note that achieving that sensibility is itself an important first step.

To live is to compare. And to compare is to think normatively. Every act of comparison, conscious or subconscious, implicates an idea of some normal against which the comparison then proceeds. This includes commonplace assessments—so and so is an early riser, so and so is rather tall, etc.—as much as it does sophisticated scholarly inquiries. Every discipline across the human and natural sciences has its own specific histories and genealogies of comparison. For the geographic regions in which most of my work is anchored, East Asia and to a lesser extent South Asia, this genealogy has been especially fraught. Generations of historians of China and India (I use the terms here as regional markers and not as representative of the modern nation-states that lay claim to them today) have long had to wrestle with and resist the enervating power of an invariably unfavorable comparison with the West (initially limited to Europe but, subsequently, inclusive of the United States as well).

Over the course of several centuries, mythic constructions of the ideas "China" and "India" did heroic work in helping Enlightenment figures build theories of a unified and exceptional "West." Hegel (in) famously set the ball rolling by noting in the *Philosophy of History* that "China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World's History, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their vital progress." Other luminaries of the Western academic canon followed in his wake, from Marx (think Asiatic mode of production) to Weber (think *The Religion of India* and *The Religion of China*). They were, in turn, enhanced by an immense body of scholarship, which, in Charles Tilly's grand summary, created eight "pernicious postulates" that have enjoyed enduring influence across the social sciences.

In the China field, these developments did much to inform an understanding of China's past that rendered it static, unchanging, mired in tradition, incapable of innovation, and unable to adapt to a changing world without external agents. Although the legacies of these approaches have cast a long shadow, they have also been robustly critiqued; in any case,

the dramatic growth of the Chinese economy since the 1980s leaves the essentialism of earlier eras with no place to hide. Paul Cohen was among the first to summarize some of these tensions when he articulated the need for a China-centric history. Lydia Liu reminded us of the unavoidable unevenness involved in translation, wherein the instability of meaning was as much about the incommensurability of language as it was about asymmetrical power enjoyed by the translators. And echoes of subaltern studies' push to denationalize history writing can be found in the powerful works of Prasenjit Duara.

Some of the most interesting developments are now taking place outside the American academy. Chen Kuan-hsing in Taiwan and Chua Beng Huat in Singapore have been working for some years now with concepts like "inter-Asia" and "Asia-as-method," using them to question our points of reference and our frames of comparison. The journal they coedit, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, has been publishing for over twenty years. Although their work concerns Asia—howsoever defined—the conceptual and methodological shifts they seek to promote have wider applicability. The Social Science Research Council launched an inter-Asia program in 2008, which established an international network linking institutions across the world and included a multiyear fellowship program for junior scholars. From the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, Dilip Menon has been spearheading a project on concepts from the Global South, with the aim of establishing a multilingual global conversation on social theory. I have found these approaches immensely powerful to think with and through. Thus far, they remain confined to the broader realms of cultural studies and intellectual history, and it will be interesting to see whether they are able to enjoy wider reach within history in the years to come.

Despite these exciting developments, the methodological insight on comparison that I keep returning to is one that was formulated and articulated most compellingly by the California School historians R. Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz. In two foundational books published toward the end of the twentieth century (*China Transformed* and *The Great Divergence*), they deployed what they labeled the method of "reciprocal comparisons." For Pomeranz, employing reciprocal comparisons meant starting from the perspective that both Western Europe and the lower reaches of the Yangzi River in China (and indeed other parts of the world as well) were all deviations from some putative norm. Through this simple enough conceptual move, that none of them ought to be regarded as the norm, Pomeranz was able to demonstrate much in common across many regions of the globe around the year 1800. In so doing, Pomeranz collated, synthesized, and compared an impressive amount of secondary research (including unpublished manuscripts) and socioeconomic data on Europe, on China, and to a lesser extent on India, Southeast Asia, Japan, and other parts of the world. His resultant thesis of contingent divergence shook our discipline in tremendously

generative ways, but to my mind, even more lasting has been its methodological legacy of reciprocal comparisons.

Combining these insights with the earlier appreciation for connections has helped me approach aspects of my own work through the maxim that connections facilitate comparisons. For instance, discovering connections between Chinese and Indian statisticians during the 1950s helped me appreciate what was at stake for Chinese planners and statisticians, without reducing my analysis to simpler but clearly insufficient comparisons between the West and China or between capitalism and communism; neither was the analysis reduced to a discussion of the bipolar nature of science during the Cold War. In some of my ongoing work, as well, I hope to explore connections between actors in China and elsewhere to engage in comparative thinking. This includes looking at the ways in which Chinese expertise in small hydropower expansion by the 1980s became a source of alternative, smaller-scale thinking about rural energy across the globe. Similarly, an attempted collaboration between German, Chinese, and Indian biogas practitioners during the late 1970s will, I hope, allow me to explore different approaches to innovation in these countries.

As my own work has gravitated toward histories of political economy, science and technology, and the environment, I have increasingly reflected upon the humanistic roots of our discipline. After all, so many of the pressing questions of our time require historical analyses that extend beyond the traditional fields and methods of historical scholarship. There are at least two elements to consider here: the substantive and the methodological. Substantively, what are the topics that historians typically study and to what extent should those topics be expanded, especially in light of the ever-increasing specialization of knowledge across all domains? If we are unable to draw upon these bodies of knowledge to explore historical questions, then the dangers of limiting ourselves and reducing our relevance are quite real. No doubt this tension cuts both ways. On the one hand, we want to reassert the relevance and importance of the humanities. But, on the other, we need to do this without retreating into a humanities-alone position.

Much of this also has to do with the methodologies we choose to employ. It is hard to contest that archival and paleographic analyses are (and ought to remain) the core of our discipline. But historians are also brilliant at incorporating other forms of evidence, from the literary and visual to the quantitative, archeological, and geographic. At the same time, we are confronted today by methods that we have yet to fully incorporate into our practice and training. A notable, but far from exclusive, example is our discipline's discomfort with text and data mining and spatial analysis. Recent works, such as Ruth Mostern's just-published, history of the Yellow River and Brian Lander's environmental history of early imperial China might help push this debate further.

Taken together, these observations raise the question of who becomes a historian. History of science offers examples where we see historians

of science who also have advanced degrees in a specific scientific or engineering discipline. And legal historians are frequently also formally trained in the law. But these remain exceptions, not the norm. By and large, I suspect the composition of our disciplinary cohorts is still dominated by choices made in childhood, when some of us naturally gravitated toward the arts and humanities, while others found themselves drawn to the "harder" natural and physical sciences (needless to say, exceptions to this broad pattern exist). A particularly perverse version of this exists in places that have long valorized STEM disciplines and the biomedical sciences, such as India and China. In these societies, this selection is carried out young, when we enter high school, but frequently even prior to that. Societal pressure dictates that the "smart" kids study science; the "weak" students study the humanities. The resultant stigma attached to the humanities means that many a brilliant future historian (or anthropologist, sociologist, or geographer) ends up a mediocre engineer or indifferent scientist. The situation is not as bleak (yet!) in the United States, where the liberal arts continue to survive, but here too the threat of STEM-fundamentalism grows ever stronger. Under these circumstances, how should the historical profession attract and train the next generation of historians? Our imperative ought to be not to widen this chasm, but rather to build bridges across it. We ought to be in greater dialogue with our peers in other disciplines.

These observations apply to the entire historical profession but come with opportunities and challenges for global history, especially in terms of pedagogy and training. Global history, perhaps more than any other subfield, has the methodological imperative to think in frames and scales that push us all out of the comfort of our parochial training—bet it regional, linguistic, or topical. This sensibility can be an asset as we rethink history in more capacious terms.

Readers may have noted my words of praise above for Lander and Mostern. Although their books are not works of global history as most of us might understand it, in their multidisciplinary approach and in placing the environment at the heart of their analyses, they point to global history's greatest challenge going forward. Given that we inhabit an age, following John McNeill, of Great Acceleration, it is incumbent upon us to ask how global history can better address questions of the environment (and all its varied aspects, of which climate change is but a part). In their intellectual history of the idea of the environment, Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin note that older understandings of the term typically pointed to the setting or background against which historical events unfolded. In other words, it was akin to the historians' stock phrase: context. Over time, however, the environment came to take on increasingly complex and expansive meanings, moving from international to global to eventually planetary scales. If in the past, then, the environment was historically intelligible as context, today it is history that is unintelligible without a proper accounting of the environment.

Going forward, the environment presents global history with both an object of research and a challenge to its own identity. The climate crisis has forced us not only to understand the environment in our contemporary moment; we must also understand it historically. And it requires our discipline to extend beyond a purely humanistic frame. For the environment demands thinking in scales and frameworks and domains of knowledge that by necessity require us to transcend the confines of human endeavor. This, I think, is global history's big challenge for the coming decade, and perhaps beyond.

Having written somewhat idealistically, let me close on a more mundane and sobering note. I was trained at a time of remarkable openness in China studies. Archives and libraries that had lain closed for decades were made accessible to researchers to trawl through. Chinese and foreign scholars used the opportunity to range across the country, no longer limiting themselves to centralized repositories like the No. 1 (in Beijing) and No. 2 (in Nanjing) Archives. Instead they also explored major municipal archives (Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, etc.), provincial archives, and county and village archives, combining such textual research with ethnography, oral history, and much else. This access was accompanied by a boom in published primary material as different echelons of the Chinese state and Chinese society sought to document aspects of their own histories. Although these developments were a boon for the field of Chinese history as a whole, historians of the PRC (i.e., post–1949 China) were among its prime beneficiaries. Just as crucial was the increased communication and collaboration with colleagues in China. On the student side, greater numbers of Chinese nationals came to the US for doctoral work. Many of them stayed and took teaching positions in the US, while others returned and took on positions in China.

Over the past decade, this era of access to research materials and scholarly interaction has slowly drawn to close, itself a part of a wider crackdown on civil society within the People's Republic. Foreign scholars now find it increasingly onerous to get research visas. Even if visas are granted, they do little to change the facts on the ground—heavily circumscribed or often complete denial of access to archives and libraries. Chinese colleagues find themselves constrained in their ability to collaborate thanks to new regulations that have significantly curtailed the scope of projects they can research. The dire implications of these developments for the training of graduate students cannot be overemphasized. Already faced with a precarious job market in the United States, many students of Chinese history now face the additional uncertainty of being unable to research projects they have spent years developing. COVID-19 has, of course, only exacerbated the situation and made any kind of research on the mainland impossible over the last two years. And now with the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, we are in the midst of dramatic shifts in global geopolitics. The Cold War historian Odd Arne Westad has opined that this might be the first modern crisis in which China may end up playing a more influential role than

the United States.[11] It is too early to even speculate on what the situation will look like when the dust settles. But these developments are sure to herald a changed world for global history projects that touch upon China and draw upon connective and comparative methods.

Selected Recommended Reading:

Beng Huat Chua, "Inter-Asia Referencing and Shifting Frames of Comparison," in *The Social Sciences in the Asian Century*, edited by Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Vera Mackie, and Carol Johnson (Canberra, 2015).

Brian Lander, *The King's Harvest: A Political Ecology of China from the First Farmers to the First Empire* (New Haven, CT, 2021)

Dilip Menon, ed., *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South* (New York, 2022).

Ruth Mostern, *The Yellow River: A Natural and Unnatural History* (New Haven, CT, 2021).

Rebecca Herman

Latin America and the Guts of Global History

Writing about the World, Rooted in Place

Early on in graduate school, I began looking into a network of defensive airbases that Pan American Airways built for the US War Department in Latin America during World War II. Wading through blueprints and contracts in Pan Am's corporate archive, restless and wondering whether I could commit a decade of my life to this story, I came across a balance sheet enumerating labor claims against Pan Am that were pending in labor courts across the north and northeast of Brazil—and I felt that rush of adrenaline that I have since come to recognize as a compass in the archives. I knew those courts. Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas, at the time a popular dictator, inaugurated a brand-new system of labor tribunals across the country in 1941. It appeared that Brazilian workers were using the new courts to force Pan Am to uphold the dictates of Brazilian labor laws, while the US government sought to evade them in order to speed up construction and keep costs down. I wondered how Vargas, US ally and "father of the poor," navigated the conflicting impulses of his foreign and domestic agendas. I took the list of pending claims to Brazil, where I traveled from town to town, knocking on doors of labor tribunals, until, finally, at a warehouse in a city near the mouth of the Amazon River, I located a collection of rare microfilm with preserved records from the era—and there I found my footing.

11 Westad made these observations during a conversation with Frederik Logevall: "A New Cold War? Geopolitical Implications of the War in Ukraine," Harvard Ash Center, March 8, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYuTrERVqic.