BRILL

JOURNAL OF EARLY
MODERN HISTORY 27 (2023) 7–31

Journal of
Early Modern
History

brill.com/jemh

What Differences Make a Difference? Global History and Microanalysis Revisited

Francesca Trivellato | ORCID: 0000-0001-6864-1451
School of Historical Studies, Institute for Advanced Study,
Princeton, NJ, USA
ft@ias.edu

Abstract

This article discusses a number of scholarly trends that fall under the rubric of global history, with particular regard for those that address the early modern period (*c.*1400–1800). It stresses the rubric's lack of coherence from both a methodological and ideological perspective. Most importantly, it revisits longstanding debates about the intersection of microanalysis and global history by assessing landmark works by Italian microhistorians, scholars of the so-called great divergence, and historians of climate and the environment. In so doing, it also asks how recent contributions build on insights that classic studies had already yielded – at least on the margins of the profession – beginning in the 1970s.

Keywords

microhistory – Little Ice Age – great divergence – early modernity – Natalie Zemon Davis – Carlo Ginzburg – Kenneth Pomeranz

Introduction

I wish to introduce the questions I seek to grapple with in this article by way of an aspect of Natalie Zemon Davis's intellectual biography as she recounts it in the introduction to her 2006 *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds*:

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/15700658-BJA10057
© FRANCESCA TRIVELLATO, 2023 | ISSN: 1385-3783 (print) 1570-0658 (online)

> I first came upon al-Hasan al-Wazzan's *Description of Africa* more than forty years ago, when I had just completed my doctoral dissertation on Protestantism and the printing workers of sixteenth-century Lyon. One of those Lyon Protestants was the merchant-publisher Jean Temporal, who was translating the *Description* into French and having it printed in the mid-1550s. I marveled at Temporal's breadth of interests and at the illustrations of an imagined Africa engraved by his brother-in-law. But my attention then was on something else: on the confrontation of worker with employer and of layman with cleric within the dense life of a French city, subjects little attended to by the history-writing of the 1950s. The encounter between Europe and Africa in the *Description* seemed far away and less urgent. […] The sustained interplay between Islam and Christianity that I might have detected in the life and writing of "Jean Léon l'Africain" would have seemed too middling a religious stance to invite analysis.
>
> In the mid-1990s the relation between European and non-European populations was at the center of things, and polar ways of thinking were being challenged. […] It seemed a fine moment to return to Jean Léon l'Africain, whom I began to think of as al-Hasan al-Wazzan, the name he had for most of his life. I now also had family connections with his part of the world, in Morocco and Tunisia. Through his example, I could explore how a man moved between different polities, made use of different cultural and social resources, and entangled or separated them so as to survive, discover, write, make relationships, and think about society and himself.[1]

Whereas Davis's pioneering essays on Lyon's urban culture (collected in a 1975 volume) and her landmark *The Return of Martin Guerre* (published in 1983) were set in sixteenth-century France and animated by questions about class, gender, and the nature of religious culture, in the 1990s it was "the relation between European and non-European populations" that commanded the author's attention.[2] In her telling, what prompted this shift in focus were changes in the world – both internal and external to the academy – as well as in her family life. In spite of this shift in focus, in *Trickster Travels* we find all the hallmarks of Davis's scholarship, including a deep empathy toward her subjects, a concerted effort to show how even under the most oppressive conditions, certain individuals found ways of expressing and asserting themselves, and an unusual willingness to use her informed historical imagination to fill in gaps left by blanks and ambiguities in the surviving documents. Davis does not tell us whether focusing on the relation between Europeans and non-Europeans also demanded a change in her practice of history writing. In my reading, it did not.

---

[1] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York, 2006), 10.

[2] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, 1975); Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

If my reading is correct, the long passage that I excerpted raises several questions: When is a global perspective (for lack of better words) a topic, a theme, an angle, and when does it imply a specific methodology? What are the implications of reorienting one's own research subjects in light of current geopolitics, biographical experiences, and new sensitivities toward the non-West (which, at last, European historians have realized is most, rather than the rest, of the world)? How do these issues affect those of us trained as historians of early modern Europe? More specifically, does a focus on "the relation between European and non-European populations" modify our scales of observation and how we move from microanalysis to generalizations?[3]

In what follows, I address these questions in three steps. First, I offer some inevitably truncated thoughts about the trends that fall under the rubric of global history and find that, in comparison to other historiographical approaches, they are particularly disparate and sometimes even incongruous. I then turn to assess the meeting of global history and the history of early modern Europe – a problem that is also inextricable from the origins of this journal. Sampling recent works in the history of climate and the environment, I illustrate the inertia as well as the novelties engendered by this meeting. Finally, I review some contributions by Italian microhistorians and by scholars of the so-called great divergence between Europe and China with the aim of discussing their respective modalities of juxtaposing different scales of analysis.[4] One thing that these seemingly unrelated studies have in common is an insistence on the constructed nature of “the global,” which they do not take to be an *a priori* category but rather define and demarcate as part of their research and writing.

---

[3] It is all too common for Anglo-American scholars to describe Davis' work, and *The Return of Martin Guerre* in particular, as classics in "microhistory," even if she never uses the term. See, e.g., Keith Thomas, "Historians and Storytellers," *Common Knowledge* 25 (2019): 163–164, the section on microhistory in Richard T. Vann, "Historiography," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/historiography, and the blog "Five Best Books on Microhistory," https://fivebooks.com/best-books/micro-history-jonathan-healey/. For Davis's own association with "the perspectives of global history," see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World," *History and Theory* 50 (2011): 188–202.

[4] For reasons of space and because of how I define the limits of my survey, I omit any discussion of "connected histories," which has nevertheless been an influential trend in the past two decades.

The idea that the scale at which we analyze a historical phenomenon should be “an object of study” in itself, in the sense that there is no “natural” scale (e.g. small for villages and macro for countries or continents), is one of the key insights of Italian microhistory.[5] The point cannot be stressed enough in relation to ongoing debates on the intersection of microhistory and global history and strikes me as vital to a special issue like this one, entitled “Global Microhistory of the Local and the Global.”[6]

In principle, Italian microhistorians always valorized the variation of analytical scales more than they privileged the micro (a life story, a detail, a neighborhood) for its own sake. It follows that the micro is not a synonym with the local as a spatial category; rather, microanalysis is a tool to test generalizations.[7] Whether in the hands of a cultural historian like Carlo Ginzburg or a social historian like Giovanni Levi, microanalysis served as a critique of top-down interpretative grids. Their actor-centered approach rebuffed the use of pre-established analytical categories (such as the distinction between elite culture and popular religion or between charity, gift exchanges, and the market); it sought instead to reconstruct the social and mental categories that informed the choices of individuals and groups whose options were limited but not nil. Well-documented statistical anomalies (be they an eccentric miller or an apparently odd price series) have proven particularly fruitful to this endeavor because they do not fit into accepted frameworks of analysis and therefore require that new ones be developed.[8]

Admittedly, however, Italian microhistorians, with a few exceptions, conducted their inquiries at a village or regional scale, generating the erroneous impression that this was their only scope. In this piece, I pause on those few, notably Ginzburg and Simona Cerutti, who broke with this geographical constraint and consider the methodological consequences that this break necessitated. Offspring of the original microhistorical project, their works in a global vein have yielded novel perspectives because they show that as soon as we adopt a less local and a less Euro-centered standpoint, we inevitably call into question existing modalities of combining micro and macro analysis. The same is true for scholarship that was not directly influenced by Italian microhistory, such as the literature on the great divergence. To venture beyond a spatially bounded and culturally homogenous area demands that we interrogate the premises according to which we compare, contrast, and harmonize sources produced in different localities, by different institutional bodies, in different languages, for different purposes, and sometimes in different time periods.

---

[5] Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge, 1992), 93–113, cit. 96. See also Jacques Revel, ed.,*Jeux d’échelles: La micro-analyse à l’expérience* (Paris, 1996).

[6] See also two other special issues devoted to the topic: John-Paul Ghobrial, ed., “Global History and Microhistory,” *Past & Present*, Supplement 14 (2019); Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, eds., “Micro-analyse et histoire globale,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 73 (2019).

[7] Angelo Torre, *Production of Locality in the Early Modern and Modern Ages: Places* (London, 2020).

[8] Jacques Revel, “Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social,” in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, eds. Revel and Lynn Hunt, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1998), 492–502.

By choice and by necessity, my comments are confined to some European and North American examples, although there is a great deal of global history written in other regions of the world, including in Asia, often in Chinese or Japanese. My disclaimer is not perfunctory: as we will see, the writing of global history is often shaped by local and national politics, in the strictest and broadest sense of the word.

What Difference Does Global History Make to the Writing and the Politics of History?

Perhaps the greatest challenge in addressing the topic of global history is that its meaning is amorphous. If that is true for many other trends, schools, and "turns" in the historical profession, it is exponentially more so for global history, which encompasses modes of writing that are sometimes difficult to reconcile with one another, ideologically or methodologically. Among academics on the Left, the label stands for a rejection of nationalism and xenophobia and can gesture toward more inclusive forms of classroom teaching and less sectorial hiring practices. But scholars on the Right are equally interested in charting the ebb and flow of globalization and globalism.

Thematically and geographically, most self-described contributions to global history do not cover the entire planet, while those that do so rarely offer strikingly new narratives.[9] Chronologically, global history is a darling of modern historians, whose overlap with scholars of earlier periods is generally minimal. Some specialists of the post-1800 period display a predilection for "international" history to designate the study of "hard" topics linked to diplomacy, political economy, and military history, and reserve "global" for "softer" themes such as human rights, migration, material culture, and the like. Not even this distinction, however, is set in stone.[10] All in all, global history often hints at something, but not something precise, and all implicit understandings remain in flux.

---

[9] A point also made by David Bell, "This Is What Happens When Historians Overuse the Idea of Network," *The New Republic*, October 25, 2013. The section on medieval Europe in John R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of World History* (New York, 2003), 137–147, is indebted to Max Weber and hardly distinguishable from what one finds in a traditional textbook. Jürgen Osterhammel's *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2015) received many accolades, presumably for its capaciousness rather than for its novelty. Oddly, the book devotes few words to slavery in the United States (131). This paucity is less the result of a genuine

For Lynn Hunt, "a more globally oriented history" today represents a "new paradigm," on par with the "four major paradigms of historical research in the post-World War II era: Marxism, modernization, the Annales school, and, in the United States especially, identity politics."[11] In fact, it is not clear how global history might constitute a paradigm. The examples of "a more globally oriented history" that Hunt offers lack the methodological coherence or even the belligerence toward alternative methods that are the minimum requirements of a paradigm. Global history comes in a wide assortment of styles. Politically, too, it is divided on many vexed topics, including the timing and consequences of globalization. For some, global history coincides with "going big," in the sense of producing sprawling and digestible narratives capable of enticing a broader audience. But global history also comes in the form of highly academic regional or trans-regional studies. For historians of Europe, it has a particularly fraught

---

effort to move away from a Western-centric orientation than the neglect of a topic that, especially in the years between its original German version (2009) and its English translation (2014), has become central and controversial in the global history of the nineteenth century. Incidentally, although I do not broach the issue of the gendered nature of certain strands of global history here, I cannot but note that all of the 22 signed endorsements of Osterhammel's book on the publisher's webpage are by male authors: https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691169804/the-transformation-of-the-world.

[10] The Weatherhead Initiative on Global History at Harvard University is among the centers that sponsor numerous activities that elsewhere may go under the rubric of international history. https://wigh.wcfia.harvard.edu/. Sebastian Conrad's go-to *What is Global History?* (Princeton, 2017) is understood as a survey of the field but treats primarily the post-1800 period.

[11] Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York, 2014), 40, 13. For Hunt, a paradigm is "an overarching account or meta-narrative of historical development that includes 1) a hierarchy of factors that determine meaning, and … 2) an agenda for research" (13–14). Hunt brackets under the heading "identity politics" a number of different "theories" (cultural studies, poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, the linguistic turn, the cultural turn) that took root in North American academia in the 1960s and 1970s. She argues that they share a focus on group identity and culture, rather than society, and that this shift in focus was stimulated by the civil rights and the women's and gay liberation movements (17–26).

relationship with the history of empires and colonialism. In short, global history is a lot of things but it is not a paradigm.

My goal here is not to recommend a normative definition of global history. Quite the opposite: I take the unstructured and at times contradictory nature of the work catalogued under this rubric as my starting point. The difficulty of pinning down global history's core methodological strands is acute even if we concede that historians are by and large comfortable with loose historiographical concepts and, in comparison to social scientists or critical theorists, rarely strive for clear-cut theoretical models. Rather than glossing over this lack of uniformity, we need to put it front and center in our analysis. It represents a distinct phenomenon, something that sets it apart from earlier moments in the Western historiography of the twentieth century.

Global history elicits strong feelings yet generates no consensus. It is denounced as a projection onto the past of the mind-frame and habits of wealthy, globetrotting elites just as often as it is heralded as an antidote to constructions of the past enshrined by those elites.[12] In 2021, a group of doctoral students in the Department of History at the European University Institute (EUI) published a white paper in open access to decry the extent to which global history is becoming yet another instrument of domination by the English-speaking North on the global South. Interestingly, however, the paper also states plainly that "there is nothing canonical about global history: indeed since its establishment in 2009, the EUI Global History seminar has altered so dramatically that not a single reading from the 2009 syllabus is on the syllabus for 2020."[13] The new editorial team of the *Journal of Global History* echoes these sentiments: "the varied contributions of today's global history all share a *transgressive impulse*" insofar as they "transcend the boundaries of what currently pass for the established fields and disciplines." But having affirmed that "what distinguishes global history is its concern for crafting new concepts and methods to crystalise aspects of the past which would otherwise remain obscure or elusive," the editors provide no examples of such concepts and methods.[14]

---

[12] Jeremy Adelman, "What is Global History Now?," *Aeon*, 2 March 2017. https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment; Richard Drayton and David Motadel, "Discussion: The Futures of Global History," *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018): 1–21.

[13] The EUI Global History Seminar Group, "For a Fair(er) Global History," *Cromohs* (*Cyber Review of Modern Historiography*), February 2021, doi:10.36253/cromohs-12559. The authors are listed by name alphabetically, with no hierarchical distinction between the doctoral students and the two faculty members in the group.

[14] Ewout Frankema, Gagan Sood, and Heidi Tworek, "Editors' Note: Global History after the Great Divergence," *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021): 1–3, cit. 2 (emphasis in the original).

When trying to inject a semblance of order into this mélange of reflections, it may help to start by recognizing that the global turn in its current iterations began roughly three decades ago in response to the need for less Western-centered and less nationalistic narratives of the past. One impetus came from curricular reforms at the secondary school and college level in the United States, where by 2060 non-Hispanic whites will be a minority of the population.[15] According to the data gathered by the American Historical Association, since the beginning of the twenty-first century "world history" has been the fastest-growing field in departments of history in the United States.[16] Meanwhile, the decline in the number of those teaching European and U.S. history during the past forty years has been slow, and predictably more pronounced in European history.[17] Overall, *pace* political pundits, the growth of world history is largely demand-driven and has hardly displaced the primacy of national history.

In their plea for the value of global history, Richard Drayton and David Motadel remind readers that "national history is and remains the dominant form of historical inquiry" with "token Africanists and Middle Easternists … asked to represent the histories of entire regions over millennia" in most departments of history in Europe and North America.[18] In their piece, published in 2018, during the post-Brexit-referendum limbo, global history is cast as a remedy to the return of nationalism. Of course, global history itself comes in many national flavors.[19] One example is the successful and controversial volume *France in the World: A New Global History*.[20] A media event, with over one hundred thousand copies sold in France, it was caught in a storm of criticism in a country in which citizens of Arab descent suffer from severe discrimination. Not only right-wing intellectuals, but also a scholar like Pierre Nora claimed that it offered a "militant" view of national history favoring immigrants and minorities.[21] Academics from the Left noted instead the prevalence of male contributors from the most prestigious national universities and the absence of non-metropolitan perspectives in a volume aiming to offer a more inclusive history of the nation and its former empires.[22]

---

[15] https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf.

[16] Robert B. Townsend, "The Rise and Decline of History Specialization over the Past 30 Years," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Organization*, December 2015: https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2015/the-rise-and-decline-of-history-specializations-over-the-past-40-years. I would venture to guess that the growth of "world history" has been more rapid at large state universities, where world history surveys have replaced former WestCiv courses, than at elite colleges and research universities, where niche classes are still taught. To my knowledge, only the University of Hawai'i-Manoa, Northeastern University, Washington State University, and the University of Pittsburg currently offer doctoral programs in "world history." For a more detailed survey, see Heather Streets-Saleter, "Becoming a World Historian: The State of Graduate Training in World History and Placement in the Academic World," in *A Companion to World History*, ed. Douglas Northrop (Malden, Mass., 2012), 45–62. The differences and overlaps between world history, global history, and other allied rubrics are beyond the scope of this article, in which I rely on the classificatory regimes used by the scholars I engage with. Suffice to note that the inaugural issue of the *Journal of World History* in 1990 opened with a note by the journal editor, Jerry Bentley, titled "A New Forum for Global History."

[17] Robert B. Townsend, "Decline of the West or the Rise of the Rest? Data from 2010 Shows Rebalancing of Field Coverage in Departments," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Organization*, September 2011: https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2011/decline-of-the-west-or-the-rise-of-the-rest.

France in the World and the EUI white paper are reminders of the polemics that surround global history: for some, it has not done enough to dismantle the status quo; for others, it has already gone too far. Given these reactions, as well as the instability of global history as a historiographical trend, it seems more prudent and rewarding to examine its conundrums by looking at some of its specific incarnations.

What Difference Does Global History Make to the History of Early Modern Europe?

The founding of the *Journal of World History* in 1991 by the late Jerry H. Bentley was a watershed moment in the global turn, and one in which scholars of early modern Europe (beginning with Bentley) played a significant part. The establishment of the *Journal of Early Modern History*, subtitled "Contacts,

---

[18] Drayton and Motadel, "Discussion," 8–9.

[19] Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice Around the World* (London, 2018).

[20] Patrick Boucheron, ed., *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris, 2017); English trans. *France in the World: A New Global History*, ed. Stéphane Gerson, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan et al. (New York, 2019). This project has been imitated and adapted in other countries.

[21] "'Histoire mondiale de la France': Pierre Nora répond à Patrick Boucheron," *L'Obs*, 28 March 2017.

[22] Romain Bonnet, "Histoire mondiale de la France," *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 25 (2018): 1055–1057; Arthur Asseraf, "Le monde comme adjectif: Retour sur l'*Histoire mondiale de la France*," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 68 (2021): 151–162. See also Quentin Deluermoz, ed., *D'ici d'ailleurs: Histoires globales de la France contemporaine* (Paris, 2021).

Comparisons, Contrasts: Early Modernity Viewed from a World-Historical Perspective," followed in 1997, while the *Journal of Global History*, created in 2006, is a considerably later addition.[23]

Indeed, some of the work that global history is doing today was once the responsibility of the notion of "early modernity," which took off slowly in the Anglo-American academia beginning in the 1940s with a twin goal: to replace the Renaissance/Baroque/Enlightenment periodizing sequence, while also offering a corrective to its Eurocentrism.[24] Already in the 1970s, the Harvard historian of China and Central Asia Joseph Fletcher outlined the possibility of an "integrative history" centered on the "parallels and interconnections" that he detected across Eurasia in the "early modern period" defined as 1500–1800 – a chronology that, he argued, corresponds to transformations that occurred in both Europe and the so-called gunpowder empires.[25] Since then, we have witnessed attempts to carry out aspects of Fletcher's program, such as Victor Lieberman's study of state formation in East and South East Asia (with a European and global comparative angle); updates of his program by proponents of connective rather than comparative history, as well as endless debates about the pertinence and limits of the label "early modern."[26] More recently, building on previous studies of the Song dynasty, Anne Gerritsen has proposed to trace back the beginning of the early modern period to the eleventh century.[27] In the field of Ottoman history, "early modernity" remains the driver of any trans-imperial agenda, with barely concealed political subtexts regarding the relationship between the Turkish Republic and Europe.[28]

---

[23] One would be remiss not to mention *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, founded in 1958 by Cynthia Thrupp. Genuinely global in its comparative scope, it promoted bold methodological experiments and reflections at the crossroads of history and anthropology.

[24] Jerry H. Bentley, "Early Modern Europe and the Early Modern World," in *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and Community in the Early Modern World*, eds. Charles H. Parker and Jerry H. Bentley (New York, 2007), 13–31. See also Justus Nipperdey, "Inventing 'Early Modern' Europe: Fashioning a New Historical Period in American Historiography 1880–1945," *Journal of Early Modern History* 26 (2022): 1–25.

[25] Joseph F. Fletcher, "Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 9 (1985): 37–58, reprinted in Fletcher, *Studies on Chinese and Islamic Inner Asia*, ed. Beatrice Forbes Manz (Aldershot, 1995), 1–46. Published posthumously in 1985, the piece condensed ideas that Fletcher had already shared with students and colleagues in the previous decade. On its author and his scholarly influence, see the review of the 1995 volume by R. Bin Wong in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 40 (1997): 325–327. We owe the enduring label "gunpowder empires," which refers to the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, to Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 3: *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago, 1974).

[26] Victor Lieberman*, Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2003–2009); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997): 735–762; Subrahmanyam, "Turning the Stones Over: Sixteenth-Century Millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40 (2003): 129–161, reprinted in Subrahmanyam, *From the Tagus to the Ganges: Explorations in Connected*

The cumulative effect of three decades of engagement with global trends of various sorts has left a mark on traditional topics of European history. At a minimum, today one cannot study the French Revolution without addressing the Haitian Revolution. Similarly, whereas the mainstay question in European economic history used to be why the industrial revolution occurred in England rather than France, we now debate why it happened in England rather than China. The problem, then, is how these thematic shifts disturb existing methodological practices and what innovation they bring about.[29]

On the surface, the most ambitious global history of the early modern period written by a Europeanist in the past decade is Geoffrey Parker's *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*. Here the renowned historian of the early modern military revolution and European dynastic polities promises a whole new interpretation of a topic that had fallen into oblivion after the mid-1970s: what Hugh Trevor-Roper in 1957 called the "general crisis of the seventeenth century."[30] Motivated by historians' improved ability to analyze the "natural" (scientific) and "human" (literary) archives in tandem, Parker makes climate change the pivot of his narrative and expands the boundaries of the general crisis well beyond Europe.

His premise is a generalization: the entire northern hemisphere, adversely affected by colder temperatures, natural disasters, and, alternatively, either droughts or excessive precipitation, erupted in uprisings. However, Parker does not wish to be pigeonholed as a "climatic determinist." He thus turns climate into a supplementary causal element alongside political action and

---

History (New Delhi, 2004), 102–137; Jack A. Goldstone, "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (1998): 249–284; Randolph Starn, "The Early Modern Muddle," *Journal of Early Modern History* 6 (2002): 296–307.

[27] Anne Gerritsen, *The City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2020), 6–7.

[28] Ali Yaycıoğlu, "Ottoman Early Modern," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 7 (2020): 70–73.

[29] See also the recent thematic section "L'histoire européenne après le tournant global," in *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 76 (2021): 641–761.

[30] Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, 2013); Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present* 16 (1959): 8–42.

"contingency" (in Ming China, "climatic change further exacerbated the situation;" "adverse weather" was "one more factor" contributing to the Cossack rebellion of 1630 "that would cost half of Ukraine's Jews their lives and property;" "the Little Ice Age played its part in increasing the [Atlantic] slave trade;" in 1648, in Fermo, in central Italy, "several groups of revolutionaries" rebelled and found "their task eased by the disastrous harvest").[31]

The tension between Parker's initial generalization and his deflection of charges of climatic determinism points to a key problem in *Global Crisis*: at what scale did a supposedly trans-local catalyst of change (climate variability) operate? As a specialist of environmental history observed, not only is the standard of proof for connecting weather and starvation to political unrest very high, but it also requires systematic verifications at a local and regional level.[32] Nowhere does Parker evaluate this problem. Meanwhile, he keeps sovereign polities as his units of reference – to say nothing of the primacy he bestows upon kings and emperors, and especially their devious ministers and advisors.

Assuming the existence of a hemispheric Little Ice Age, Parker isolates only one exception to the uprisings it provoked across the globe: Tokugawa Japan. He attributes Japan's unusual political peace to an eclectic mix of imperial legislative measures, demographic stability, and an incipient "industrious revolution" (peasants' choice to work harder to acquire greater disposable income), which together mitigated any climatic disruptions. By contrast, Parker makes no room for what, by the mid-1970s, Jan de Vries had already identified as the exception to the general crisis in Europe: the United Provinces, where the seventeenth century coincided with a Golden Age.[33]

Fortunately, as of late, not all historians of climate and the environment have been equally indifferent to problems of scale. In a study influenced by Italian microhistory, Paolo Squatriti teases out the conflicting evidence buried in the human and natural archives documenting a major flood that occurred in 589 in the Po Valley, in northern Italy. His scrutiny of a single, topical event exposes its ideological appropriations by the many who turned this flood into the starting point of the so-called Dark Ages.[34] Others have analyzed teleconnection processes, that is, climate linkages across faraway localities. Doing so has led them to suggest new lines of causality between local political and economic changes, on the one hand, and distant environmental events, on the other. This is the case of a study of a volcanic eruption that took place in Iceland in 1783 and its aggravating effects on the ongoing economic and political crisis in Egypt.[35] For her part, Emma Rothschild highlights the difference that looking at scientific data on methane emissions across the globe can make. Once she zooms-in on the longitudes and latitudes of more than 1,800 datapoints, she foregrounds the potential "for 1,800 inquiries into the history of climate change."[36]

---

[31] Parker, *Global Crisis*, xix, xxvi, 123, 169, 477, 565.

[32] Paul Warde, "Global Crisis or Global Coincidence," *Past & Present* 228 (2015): 287–301.

[33] Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 1976). See also de Vries, "The Economic Crisis of the Seventeenth Century after Fifty Years," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40 (2009): 151–194 Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, the Little Ice Age, and the Dutch Republic, 1560–1720* (Cambridge, 2018).

[34] Paolo Squatriti, "The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 799–826.

The interplay of scientific and historical data and of site-specific and macro-scale observations echo, more or less explicitly, problems that Italian microhistorians mapped out early on. Yet the terms of these problems have evolved considerably.

What Difference Does Microhistory Make to Global History?

Even when their research focused on curious figures or episodes, Italian microhistorians, who pioneered their approach in the 1970s and 1980s, never relinquished their search for generalizations, whether in the form of empirical regularities or new hypotheses (a distinction to which I will return). Their intention was not to exalt the small, the local, or singularities as such. Rather, they used microanalysis to unseat existing narratives, if not paradigms. This is also visible in the few instances in which Italian microhistorians treated subjects that transcended the local: they did not take the global as a point of departure but explored its scope and definition from the perspective of the protagonists of their stories and as part of their research methods. It turns out, however, that this move required them to alter and expand their initial microanalytical approach.

At least one leading Italian microhistorian wrote what, retrospectively, can be qualified as a "global microhistory," or, perhaps more accurately, a "microhistory on a global scale." Ginzburg's *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* investigates the widespread belief in witches' rituals that flourished in many parts of medieval Europe and traces the existence of analogous beliefs across

---

[35] Alan Mikhail, "Ottoman Iceland: A Climate History," *Environmental History* 20 (2015): 262–284.

[36] Emma Rothschild, "Methane in 1,800 Histories," Feb. 2022: https://histecon.fas.harvard.edu/climate-loss/methane/index.html.

Eurasia during the prior millennium.[37] *Ecstasies* completed a trilogy on witchcraft and pagan agrarian cults that Ginzburg inaugurated with his 1966 *Night Battles*, which was followed ten years later by his hugely successful *The Cheese and the Worms*.[38] The latter two are set in Friuli, the northeastern region of Italy. They pose the question of how to go from highly specific, perhaps unique cases to general conclusions concerning the culture of a largely illiterate population on the basis of documents penned by educated inquisitors intent on suppressing that oral culture, which defied Catholic orthodoxy. In *Ecstasies*, by contrast, as Ginzburg wrote, reflecting on the book thirty years after its publication, he "traveled in spirit from Friuli to Siberia."[39] The book roams across Eurasia reaching all the way to China, and covers a dazzling variety of topics, types of evidence, texts, and authors – from Herodotus to Evliya Çelebi, Bernardino of Siena, the Daoist philosopher Ge Hong, Philip Melanchthon, and the Grimm Brothers, to cite only a few.

Ecstasies is arguably one of the least read of Ginzburg's many works. When it appeared (nearly simultaneously in Italian, English, and French), it was amply discussed by the scholarly community, and not always kindly, but perhaps because it is dense and difficult to absorb, it has since been virtually forgotten. It is worth revisiting it here because it is methodologically antithetical to most works that have subsequently been labeled "global microhistories."[40] *Ecstasies* does not revolve around a single individual and it is the least narrative of Ginzburg's trilogy, if not of his entire oeuvre. The book embraces a capacious geographical and temporal scope by following, step by step, documentary

---

[37] Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, ed. Gregory Elliot (London, 1991 [1989]). In a recent interview, Ginzburg agreed that this book could be retrospectively described as a "global microhistory": "Microhistory and Global History: Carlo Ginzburg in conversation with Francesca Trivellato," Twenty-Third Annual Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Lecture, Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, March 2, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgHcSCXknnM.

[38] Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1983 [1966]); Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1980 [1976]).

[39] Carlo Ginzburg, "Viaggiare in spirito, dal Friuli alla Siberia," in *Streghe, sciamani, visionari: In margine a Storia Notturna di Carlo Ginzburg*, a cura di Cora Presezzi (Rome, 2019), 45–63.

[40] I believe the expression "global microhistory" was launched by Tonio Andrade, "A Chinese Farmer, Two Black Boys, and a Warlord: Towards a Global Microhistory," *Journal of World History* 21 (2011): 573–591. For the meanings that are and can be attached to it, see Francesca Trivellato, "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?" *California Italian Studies* 2 (2011): https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq.

"clues" that Ginzburg first identified through a deeply local inquiry. In this respect, it is a continuation of a defining trait of Ginzburg's method.[41]

But *Ecstasies* also departs from Ginzburg's earlier microhistorical practice. From its very beginning, it adopts a comparative perspective. The book's first part analyzes the medieval persecution of Jews, lepers, Muslims, and witches, drawing analogies between how these marginal groups are portrayed in the sources produced by repressive institutions in northern Italy and France. In *Ecstasies*'s second and third parts, Ginzburg leaves Italy and France behind and sets comparative history aside in favor of morphology. Morphology allows him to detect similitudes between European beliefs in witches' sabbaths and cultural themes and practices that developed independently in other regions and periods. Formal similitudes between apparently disparate cases are the means through which Ginzburg reaches for generalizations.[42]

Morphology, a term coined by Goethe to discern resemblances between ostensibly infinite varieties of flora, is now used in the life sciences, linguistics, art history, and other disciplines to demonstrate formal and structural similarities between phenomena that would otherwise remain undetected. But as some critics have noted, likeness is in the eye of the beholder and can, paradoxically, appear more pronounced when expertise is lacking.[43] Regardless of how one judges it, morphology is by definition an etic procedure, that is, a scholar's interpretation. It presumes that observers can harmonize dispassionately the plurality of emic (actors') conceptualizations.

Across his work, Ginzburg emphasizes the dialectic between emic and etic categories as the guiding principle of all historical writing, as exemplified by his effort to bridge the cultural gap separating inquisitors and Friulian peasants.[44]

---

[41] Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm [1979]," in Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1989 [1986]), 96–125.

[42] Already in 1965, in the preface to his first book, Ginzburg wrote: "I have not dealt with the question of the relationship which undoubtedly must exist between benandanti and shamans." *The Night Battles*, xxi. For a retrospective analysis of this statement, see Ginzburg, "'I benandanti,' cinquant'anni dopo," in Ginzburg, *I benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra '500 e '600* (Milan, 2020), 281–300. For a statement in favor of the generalizability of microhistorical cases, see also Ginzburg, "Latitude, Slaves, and the Bible: An Experiment in Microhistory," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 665–683.

[43] "The less one knows the context, the genesis, the more easily one falls prey to the jolt of pseudomorphosis." Yve-Alain Bois, "On the Uses and Abuses of Look-alikes," *October* 154 (2015): 127–149, cit. 131. For a moderate and productive adaptation of such skepticism, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2020).

[44] Carlo Ginzburg, "The Inquisitor as Anthropologist," in Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 141–148; Ginzburg, "Our Words, and Theirs: A Reflection on the Historian's

Literary theorists and cultural anthropologists associated with post-colonial studies have long been skeptical of Western scholars' innocence and objectivity in the face of the radical alterity and multiplicity of emic concepts held by colonial subjects. For Gayatri Spivak, "the assumption of equivalence is upstream from all the historical language battles of postcoloniality and neocolonial power that are still being fought and must continue to be fought." And she adds, "this is not nativism."[45] Ginzburg is notoriously averse to this position, but the diverse and uneven evidentiary material from distant places, periods, and languages marshalled in *Ecstasies* reveals the pertinence of Spivak's objections. How can we delineate a neutral morphological framework? From which emic categories would we start? And how can we assume their stability across vast spatial and temporal scales? The book's geographical boundaries raise a complementary question that illustrates the issues at stake. Writing in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ginzburg uncovered a morphological unit regarding the cult of the dead which coincided with Eurasia – the very region that the Cold War had torn apart, and that Fletcher had made the arena of his program for an "integrative" early modern history. Would someone following the clues of the sabbath today, with a different set of linguistic skills and cultural presumptions, identify the same geographical unit on the basis of a morphological approach?[46]

Not every Italian microhistorian expresses the same confidence as Ginzburg in the generalizability of microhistorical cases across time and space. Levi advocates a different route to generalizations, contending that microanalysis should lead to new generalizable questions rather than to generalized answers.[47] This is the version of microhistory I drew inspiration from in my work on trading diasporas, in which I tested long-held and polarizing views of the organization of private merchants in the pre-industrial period. My central question was how cooperation developed across religious lines at a time when

---

Craft, Today," in *Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, eds. Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (Cambridge, 2012), 92–119, republished online in *Cromohs* 18 (2013): https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/cromohs/article/view/6892.

[45] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Rethinking Comparativism," *New Literary History* 40 (2009): 609–626, cit. 613. For an overview of relevant debates among cultural anthropologists, see Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Radical Worlds: The Anthropology of Incommensurability and Inconceivability," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 319–334.

[46] For other limits, as well as the merits, of Ginzburg's morphological approach, see Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln, *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf: A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Chicago, 2020).

[47] Giovanni Levi, "Frail Frontiers?" in Ghobrial, "Global History and Microhistory," 35–49, esp. 45–46. For a fuller formulation in Italian, see Levi, "La storia: Scienza delle domande generali e delle risposte locali," *Psiche: Rivista di cultura psicanalitica* 2 (2018): 361–377.

religion was a category of ascription that defined the property rights and legal status of its adherents, and when legal, information, and transportation systems were weak and fragmented.[48]

I focused on a single partnership of Iberian (Sephardic) Jews based in Livorno (in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, a Catholic state) and Aleppo (in the Ottoman Empire) during the first half of the eighteenth century but aimed at developing a comparative perspective. An extraordinary paper trail left behind by this partnership, including over ten thousand commercial letters, allowed me to show that these Sephardic merchants defied the two prevailing models of conducting long-distance trade outlined by the existing literature: they neither traded solely with other Jews (following the dictum that at the time, “trade at a distance required a kinsman or at least a trusted fellow-countryman to act as agent”[49]) nor could they rely on the mediation of fair and affordable courts when they entered into credit relations with non-Jews (notably Catholics and Hindus across the Portuguese Empire, where they confronted the risk of arbitrary confiscations by the inquisition).

Only by reducing the scale of analysis and examining the relationships that one family firm entertained with a gamut of private and state actors was I able to bring new patterns to the fore. This individual case, which I compared to other extant examples from archival and secondary sources, prompted questions about the universality of what in the 1980s Philip Curtin called “trade diasporas.” Pioneering as Curtin’s work was, it flattened the differences between mercantile groups in the interest of creating a less Euro-centric framework for world history.

The Armenian commercial diaspora of the early modern period features prominently in Curtin’s *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*. In fact, once we look more closely at the most proactive segments of Jewish and Armenian merchant communities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both of which operated across the entire globe, we find that they differed in most respects: their demographic size, the spatial configuration of their far-flung networks, the autonomy of their internal monitoring institutions, their status as religious minorities in the regions where they lived or operated, and their ties to sovereign powers. These and other factors affected their business organization, so much so that the enterprise forms employed by Julfan Armenians (thus called because they had their nodal center in the New Julfan neighborhood of the Iranian city of Isfahan, from where they exported much-prized Persian raw silk) differed markedly from those utilized by Sephardic merchants based in Western Europe. While the latter recruited commission agents among both Jews and non-Jews, Julfan Armenians relied almost exclusively on Armenian traveling agents to conduct their business abroad but also integrated more easily into the places where they put down roots.[50]

---

[48] Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, 2009). I beg to differ from Angelo Torre’s categorization of my study alongside those microhistories that “pursued biography,” ignoring “physical and humanized space as an interpretative category” (*Production of Locality*, 2). Although I did not articulate a theoretical conception of spatiality, physical distance, political borders, and jurisdictional fragmentation were among my key concerns. I used prosopography in order to understand how merchants mobilized social and institutional resources to overcome these obstacles.

[49] Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984), 3.

Rather than concluding that such variety should lead us to discard the concept of trade diaspora altogether, I suggested that we build new questions and new taxonomies starting from the richness of granular comparisons.[51] The implications of this procedure are not trivial for global history. Inspired by Curtin, some scholars have sought to downplay the differences between Asian traders and their European counterparts in an effort to contest the Asians' putative inferiority. Thus, one study of a powerful seventeenth-century Chinese family of merchants and military leaders, the Zheng, makes the case for their historical importance by analogizing their organization to that of the Dutch. Its author maintains that "the differences between the Zheng and the VOC [Dutch East India Company] largely cancel each other out, enabling a rough framework of comparison between the two entities to be established."[52] Later in the same study, however, the author concedes that a "key weakness of the Zheng lay in their relative disadvantage to the superior ships, weaponry, and fortress design of the Dutch East India Company and other Western colonial enterprises."[53] Reading the two statements side by side, one is inevitably left wondering about the purpose of the initial statement about the similarity between the Zheng and the Dutch.[54]

---

[50] Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, 2011); Francesca Trivellato, "Marriage, Commercial Capital, and Business Agency: Sephardic (and Armenian) Trans-regional Families in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Mediterranean," in *Trans-regional and Transnational Families in Europe and Beyond: Experiences since the Middle Ages*, eds. Christopher Johnson et al. (New York, 2011), 107–130.

[51] Francesca Trivellato, "Introduction: The Historical and Comparative Study of Cross-Cultural Trade," in *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900*, eds. Trivellato, Leor Halevi, and Cátia Antunes (Oxford, 2014), 1–23; Trivellato, "Sephardic Merchants in the Early Modern Atlantic and Beyond: Toward a Comparative Historical Approach to Business Cooperation," in *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800*, eds. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore, 2009), 99–120.

[52] Xing Hang, Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, *c.*1620–1720 (Cambridge, 2015), 20.

Seeking to avoid the pitfalls of such misguided analogies, Cerutti, a social historian of early modern Italy, and Isabelle Grangaud, a scholar of Ottoman North Africa, bring microanalysis and morphology to bear on comparative history and put forth a particularly original proposition.[55] They favor comparison over connectivity and circulation, and insist that comparative history need not rely solely on secondary sources. Cerutti and Grangaud examine the judiciary and administrative procedures for the allocation of properties at the death of heirless or poor individuals in eighteenth-century Turin and Algiers on the basis of archival documents. While stressing local specificities and the asymmetry of pertinent records, they reject any claims about the incommensurability of the two cases. Rather than a rapacious state in Europe and an Ottoman Empire blinded by religious zeal, they find that authorities in both cities were motivated by the same objective: to reconstruct and protect fragile kinship lineages. Their revisionist findings show the theoretical and empirical possibility of reconciling an emphasis on locality with a broad comparative perspective.

What Differences Make a Difference in Models of the Great Divergence?

When one thinks of comparative global history today, the mind immediately goes to Kenneth Pomeranz's 2000 *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. The book famously argues that the industrial revolution first occurred in England not because of advantages accumulated over centuries but because of the accidental proximity of coal to manufacturing plant sites and because of British control of enslaved labor and captive markets in the Caribbean. In this account, chance and violence – not ingenuity, Puritanism, high wages, or representative political institutions – are at the roots of modern economic growth.

---

[53] Hang, *Conflict and Commerce*, 245.

[54] For an alternative framework for the analysis of European and Asian private enterprise forms, see Oscar Gelderblom and Francesca Trivellato, "The Business History of the Preindustrial World: Towards a Comparative Historical Analysis," *Business History* 61 (2019): 225–259.

[55] Simona Cerutti and Isabelle Grangaud, "Sources and Contextualizations: Comparing Eighteenth-Century North African and Western European Institutions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59 (2017): 5–33.

Pomeranz reaches this conclusion through a series of "balanced comparisons" between England and the Lower Yangzi delta. The two regions, he writes, shared "surprising similarities in agricultural, commercial, and proto-industrial (i.e., handicraft manufacturing for the market rather than home use) development" as late as 1750. For Pomeranz, these resemblances derive from the existence of "a polycentric world with no dominant center" before 1800 and force us to redraw the map of European global dominance as outlined by Immanuel Wallerstein.[56]

Questions of scale are central to *The Great Divergence*. Geographically, it operates in multiple dimensions – regional, national, imperial, and global. Analytically, it merges micro observations into macro calculations. Relying almost exclusively on an impressive array of secondary sources, Pomeranz measures patterns of demographic change, deforestation, land markets, proto-industrial production and consumption, as well as wages and standards of living.[57]

The Great Divergence has attracted as many admirers as detractors, and these calculations are a bone of contention. A number of quantitative economists have since offered new estimates of prices and wages in both early modern Europe and China, mostly concluding that Pomeranz overestimated Chinese prosperity in the eighteenth century.[58] For his part, Pomeranz disputes the reliability of most data compiled by economists, if not also their recourse to modern methods of national accounting and other indexes of economic performance that do not correspond to the Chinese conditions of the time.[59] Disagreements about measurements are relevant to our discussion because they concern the problem of commensurability and scale: how do we factor micro-level data and local specificities into the macro picture?

---

[56] Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World* (Princeton, 2000), 4. Some critics nevertheless find that Pomeranz "balanced comparisons" in fact take European indicators of economic development as their matrix: Alessandro Stanziani, *Les entrelacements du monde: Histoire globale, pensée globale* (Paris, 2018), 105–106.

[57] See the controversial comparison between peasants' family budgets from the 1920s–1930s (the earliest ones compiled in China) and those from pre-industrial England. Pomeranz himself warned readers that "we should not make too much of these numbers" (*The Great Divergence*, 146), but did not refrain from using them.

[58] Note that some of these time series are longer than others and cover different periods because they locate the timing of the great divergence at different moments. For an introduction to the topic, see Stephen Broadberry and Bishnupriya Gupta, "The Early Modern Great Divergence: Wages, Prices and Economic Development in Europe and Asia, 1500–1800," *Economic History Review* 59 (2006): 2–31; Robert C. Allen et al., "Wages, Prices and Living Standards in China 1738–1925: In Comparison with Europe, Japan and India," *Economic History Review* 64 (2011): 8–38; Bozhong Li and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Before the Great Divergence? Comparing the Yangzi Delta and the Netherlands at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 72 (2012): 956–989; Jack A. Goldstone, "Dating the Great Divergence," *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021): 266–285.

Issues of measurements are directly connected to the problem of geographical scale, and of territorialization more specifically. Traditionally, territorialization is a byproduct of state building, but Pomeranz sidelines the role of politics in his account. He compares two regions within sovereign polities (in spite of the title, the book is not a comparison of Europe and China, or even Great Britain and China, but of England, if not Lancashire, and the Lower Yangzi delta). When it comes to England, Pomeranz also pinpoints the overseas imperial dimension. From a European perspective, his argument about the economic advantages created by the British Caribbean ghost acres raises two issues. The impact of slavery on English industrialization is still debated.[60] Moreover, the chronological synchronicity of Pomeranz's balanced comparisons overlooks the fact that British colonialism in the Atlantic began in the sixteenth century, even if the plantation complex took off around 1650 and the slave trade peaked in the eighteenth century – a fact that lends credence to the gradualist thesis of European economic development which Pomeranz aims to debunk. From a Chinese perspective, the elision of the state goes together with the elision of the maritime dimension from the comparative framework. Some have since revised the notion that eighteenth-century China was a landlocked empire and illuminated the seafaring components of Qing geopolitics in the South China Sea and in Southeast Asia, which included a navy, patrol boats, coastal fortresses, and – most importantly for the purpose of Pomeranz's comparative framework – a dense network of maritime routes for the provision and export of both raw and manufactured materials.[61]

---

[59] Kenneth Pomeranz, "Scale, Scope and Scholarship: Regional Practices and Global Economic Histories," in Beckert and Sachsenmaier, *Global History, Globally*, 163–194; Prasannan Parthasarathi and Pomeranz, "The Great Divergence Debate," in *Global Economic History*, eds. Tirthankar Roy and Giorgio Riello (London, 2019), 19–37.

[60] Amidst a much larger and divisive literature, see David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman, "The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to Industrializing Britain," *Journal of Economic History* 60 (2000): 123–144; Gavin Wright, "Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited," *Economic History Review* 73 (2020): 353–383; Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, "Slavery, Atlantic Trade and Skills: A Response to Mokyr's 'Holy Land of Industrialism,'" *Journal of the British Academy* 9 (2021): 259–281.

[61] Ronald C. Po, *The Blue Frontier: Maritime Vision and Power in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge, 2018); Melissa Macauley, *Distant Shores: Colonial Encounters on China's Maritime Frontier* (Princeton, 2021).

The absence of the state from Pomeranz's account is the point of entry into this debate for *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe*, published in 2011 by Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, an economist with long experience in French archives, and R. Bin Wong, a historian of China who, together with Pomeranz, spearheaded the scholarship on the great divergence.[62] (Incidentally, this book is a testament to the value of cross-disciplinary co-authorship[63]). Their approach matters here both because it frames comparisons in terms of territorial space and because it rests on a more selective and top-down use of primary sources than any microanalytical procedure would entail.

For Rosenthal and Wong, overseas colonial plantations played no role in the great divergence, while the difference in Asian and European political scales (namely, the sheer vastness and territorial contiguity of the Chinese Empire in contrast to the fragmentation of the European continent), as well as the warfare strategies and patterns of urbanization that went with it, proved decisive and began to matter long before the eighteenth century. Still, as they identify these structural differences, Rosenthal and Wong do not put Europe on a pedestal. For example, they do not consider the absence of public debt in China as a sign of financial backwardness but as a measure of the sufficiency of the empire's land taxes. Similarly, they explain the higher degree of informality among Chinese merchants with the existence of a uniform legal system across huge distances. By contrast, the number of political borders, tariffs, and jurisdictions that merchants had to cross even within short distances in Europe made them dependent on legal instruments and tribunals.

Methodologically, Rosenthal and Wong outline "falsifiable theories" and only begin to populate them with selective data points, hoping that others will follow suit.[64] Their work is thus more deductive than Pomeranz's and closer to how social scientists rather than historians approach comparisons today, although we may recall that hypothesis testing has been a central feature of the comparative method since Marc Bloch.[65] Ultimately, Rosenthal and Wong are satisfied with a greater level of generalities than Pomeranz but articulate a very important point: different societies can develop different solutions to the same problem, or may face different problems and therefore develop different institutions.

---

[62] Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

[63] Hunt believes that "history writing in the global era can only be a collaborative form of inquiry" (*Writing History in the Global Era*, 151). At present, however, for junior scholars in the humanities who are fortunate enough to secure a tenure-track position, co-authorship is a risky venture in the early stages of their career.

[64] Rosenthal and Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence*, 2.

[65] William H. Sewell, Jr., "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History," *History and Theory* 6 (1967): 208–218.

Conclusion

As we continue to probe the past, present, and future of global history, we cannot deny the influence of real-life politics and academic politics on its expressions. The nebulous meaning and conflicting ambitions of global history stem at least in part from this state of affairs. Here, I have concentrated on the nexus of global history and the history of early modern Europe and asked when and how shifts in thematic foci bring about conceptual and methodological experimentation.

The works that I discussed tell us that there are different ways of conceiving the global, different modalities of integrating micro and macro analysis, and different approaches to comparison. None of these issues are new. The relationship between particularities and generalities and between localized patterns and global trends have been at the heart of consequential historical and sociological studies for a long time. In 1939, Norbert Elias sought to link the introduction of the fork and new table manners in fifteenth-century Europe to the ultimate macro phenomenon: the process of state building.[66] Imperfect as all grand theories are, and now quite dated, Elias's remains a brilliant combination of micro and macro analysis and psychological and sociological explanations. It was also a consciously Euro-centered project. What footprints have this and other older undertakings left in today's global history? Which new methodological stances has global history ignited? In the case of environmental and climate history, tools and data are new, but how we might integrate them into new causal narratives remains unclear. Are what climatologists call teleconnection processes a form of morphology? What are the most fertile approaches to the constructed and historical dynamics between the local and the global?

In his 1976 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Paul Veyne reflected on the possibility of drawing comparisons between the ancient Roman Empire (the field in which he had been elected to a prestigious chair) and other empires in world history, as well as on the theoretical paradigms available to conduct such comparisons. He criticized historians for being content with cataloguing differences and for their obsession with the degree of completeness of their "inventories of differences." At the same time, Veyne also reiterated the analytical value of identifying the peculiarities of any given historical phenomenon. Doing so, he noted, provides a critique of pre-determined classificatory taxonomies and a steppingstone for a more genuine comparative approach.[67] By stressing to the point of caricature the ostensible tension between a sociological and a descriptive perspective, Veyne in fact reaffirmed history's dual status as a social scientific discipline aiming at generalities and a humanistic discipline rooted in particularities – two poles that exist in dialectical relationship with one another.

---

[66] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott with some notes and corrections by the author; eds. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell (Oxford, 1994 [1939]).

By curious coincidence, Veyne delivered his keynote in 1976, the same year that Ginzburg published *The Cheese and the Worms*. I am not privy to any conversations that might have taken place between the two scholars, but Veyne's text strikes me as fundamentally congruent with some of microhistory's core tenets and their potential for global history; it certainly deserves more attention at this juncture. Veyne concluded his remarks with "a spontaneous confession": "in history the questions, which are sociological, are more important than the answers, which are fact."[68] We are very close here to Levi's proposal that we formulate new (comparative) questions on the basis of microanalytical inquiries.

I am aware that to close this piece by evoking a work from nearly half a century ago by an eminent historian of the classical world speaking from a citadel of European academic privilege may seem a provocation, given the ambition of today's global history to "decenter" traditional historical narratives and methodologies. If in the previous pages I took a rather long retrospective view, it is not to imply that everything has been said and done. To the contrary, my hope is to harness the enthusiasm that global history generates in many quarters in order to prompt us to evaluate the import and originality of different ways of integrating microanalysis and global approaches at the onset of the twenty-first century. In the end, global history's greatest challenge may consist not simply in diversifying the regions, people, ideas, and objects on which we focus, but in questioning the ways in which we do it.

---

[67] Paul Veyne, *L'inventaire des différences: Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France* (Paris, 1976); English trans. "The Inventory of Differences," trans. Elizabeth Kingdom, *Economy and Society* 11 (2006): 173–198.

[68] Veyne, "The Inventory of Differences," 197.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Universidade Nova in Lisbon, the Freie Universität in Berlin, the University of Warwick, and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Kolkata. I am grateful to my hosts and to the audiences for their constructive and provocative responses. The participants in a session of the "Early Modern Europe Plus Seminar" at the Institute for Advanced Study in April 2021, as well as Maxine Berg and two anonymous readers, were particularly generous with comments and suggestions.