

REVIEW ESSAY

An Old Practitioner Still in Search of the *métier d'historien* Response to Peer Vries, “The Prospects of Global History: Personal Reflections of an Old Believer”

CÁTIA ANTUNES

*Institute for History, Leiden University, Johan Huizinga Building,
Doelensteeg 16, 2311 VL Leiden, The Netherlands*

E-mail: c.a.p.antunes@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Peer Vries’s eloquent review essay “The Prospects of Global History: Personal Reflections of an Old Believer” sees the chance to review *The Prospect of Global History* as an opportunity to champion Global History as a discipline and voice his concerns regarding what, in his view, have become possible abuses or deviancies in the practice of the discipline.¹ His long-standing status as one of the founding fathers of the discipline and of its consecrated *Journal of Global History* places him in a position of undisputable authority as an old believer, while his far-reaching knowledge of current debates in Global and World History and his poignant views, reflected in the review essay, are trademarks of his work.

In assessing *The Prospect of Global History*, Vries voices four concerns. The first, the conceptual variation that the book showcases in its various chapters regarding the meaning of Global History.² The second, the plea that the book invokes in distinguishing Global History as something necessarily different from all-encompassing broad narratives for the general public.³ The third, the insight that Global History as it stands, and as defended in *The Prospect of Global History*, has yet to develop a theoretical or explanatory model, as stressed by Jürgen Osterhammel in the book proper.⁴ And, lastly, the danger of reducing Global History to the narrative of

1. James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham (eds), *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford, 2016).

2. Peer Vries, “The Prospects of Global History: Personal Reflections of an Old Believer”, in this Special Issue, p. 10.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

connectivity(ies).⁵ I address each of these concerns below, which I believe the proponents of *The Prospect of Global History* intended to contribute to avoiding or resolving, rather than reinforcing.

A disclaimer is necessary. As an old practitioner, I was a guest at the Leverhulme Trust Grant workshops that supported the discussions surrounding *The Prospect of Global History* and that were organized by Oxford University's Centre for Global History, at generous initiative by James Belich and John Darwin. Those workshops can best be characterized as a platform for open, diverse, and often inflamed discussions regarding what Global History should be (rather than what it is or has become), how to make it (in other words, the *métier d'historien*) and why it is important for more historians to adhere to its disciplinary tradition. Peer Vries's concerns were broadly addressed and discussed in these three vectors and are partially reflected in the chapters constituting the book in question.

The most clearly defined concept of Global History was primarily and systematically posited on 13 March 2006, when William Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Peer Vries fundamentally defined the goal of the *Journal of Global History* as appropriate to the "increasing concern [of historians] about the segmentation of their discipline's scholarly expertise into discrete compartments, whether defined by place, period, theme or sub-discipline".⁶ For Vries and his co-authors, the journal had "the ambition of helping to overcome this fragmentation in historiography, while avoiding pitfalls that have emerged in earlier attempts to achieve this goal".⁷ This plea resulted in the discipline developing into an analysis of "global change" through comparative methods and focusing to a great extent on "zones of interaction" between different world systems and societies.⁸ These well-intentioned goals echo in John Darwin's chapter, when he refers to the need to address universal processes as the primary goal of Global History.⁹ In this sense, Darwin's echo does not differ much from the statements made in 2006 by Vries. The difference arises when looking at what Darwin means by "universal processes". For him, these processes do not arise from obvious historical developments such as the Rise of the West and are not reduced to the assessment of the event of the Industrial Revolution as a historical landmark in the Great Divergence between East and West. Instead, he implies a broader (indeed, much broader) intake by favouring all universal processes that are determined by a prospect, meaning,

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 9 and 10.

6. William Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Peer Vries, "Editorial", *Journal of Global History*, 1 (2006), p. 1.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

9. John Darwin, "Afterword: History on a Global Scale", in Belich *et al.*, *The Prospect of Global History*, pp. 180–182.

as he states himself and as corroborated by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “an extensive view of landscape”.¹⁰ This extensive view does not privilege mountains over valleys, or seas over rivers; in other words, it does not pick and choose the points in the landscape that historians should descriptively find to be more or less important. On the contrary, a prospect concept of Global History means that historians themselves are free to ascertain (and are responsible for ascertaining) which universal processes they wish to address and explain, rather than having to accept a canon determined by what the “big narratives” and “synthesis” prescribe. Why, for example, should we take it for granted that the Industrial Revolution and ensuing modern economic growth in the West are more important historically than the spread of the horse culture thousands of years earlier? Darwin’s concept demonstrates the advantage of adhering to the initial definition of what Global History should be (i.e. the explanation of universal processes) and leaving historians free to determine the specific processes they consider universal. In this process of selection, grand narratives do not become obsolete, but instead turn into instruments of communication with society in general, which generally has little historical knowledge or conscience and leave the conceptual selection and explanatory models to “professionals”.

However, and as with many other things in life, freedom carries with it a heavy burden of responsibility, and many global historians have sought to avoid defining methodologies for enquiring into, researching, and writing Global History. Shying away from the basic responsibilities that we, as historians, have to fulfil in our professional duties, as eloquently pursued and prescribed by Marc Bloch, has left us global historians divided into two groups. The first group writes Global History of universal processes, encompassing only the views expressed in the secondary works in the languages its practitioners can master and where, more often than not, opinions are formed with more or less disregard for micro-, regional, or specialized historical works. The second group writes micro- and local history under the guise of Global History, claiming to use enquiries from the discipline, but failing to explain universal processes. While this division provokes discomfort among many, few have tried to bridge the gap between the explanation of universal processes on the one hand and the use of primary sources and micro- and local history resources on the other. The divide has also ostracized micro-historians, who have been paramount in understanding realities that global historians not only ignore but can hardly conceive of in their great explanatory attempts.¹¹

10. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

11. Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory and World History”, in Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800, part 2: Patterns of Change*, Vol. VI *The Cambridge World History* (Cambridge, 2015),

Belich, Darwin, and Wickham offer a methodology for bridging the divide in an attempt to bring both groups into a conversation (rather than a discussion). Their highly plausible and reasonable approach offers Global History the commensurability that Vries appreciates and that is reflected in Kevin O'Rourke's contribution,¹² although this commensurability does not necessarily translate into numbers, but rather into criteria of assessment. Having postulated the need to use "different intensities of connections" and "different vectors of connectivity" to study, explain, and measure universal historical processes and their impact,¹³ these authors go further still to induce a *logique de la méthode critique*, in the manner of Bloch, by strictly defining the levels of intensity and vectors of connectivity they refer to.¹⁴ Contact, interaction, circulation, and integration are the determinatives that represent a sliding scale in the intensity of connections at the core of universal historical processes, with diffusion, outreach, dispersal, expansion, and attraction symbolizing the methods through which universal processes can be considered more or less mutually influential. By offering a methodological path, Belich, Darwin, and Wickham aid global historians in their task of bearing responsibility for their "prospect" choice of universal historical processes to explain, and demonstrate a fearless belief that for global historians, too, a methodologically prescriptive analytical *corpus*, as Bloch envisaged in the 1940s, is essential for developing the theoretical models desired by Vries and Osterhammel. Curiously, like Belich, Darwin, and Wickham, Bloch favoured clear methodological and analytical heuristics as a means to counter positivist history. If nothing else, a prescriptive methodological programme will save global historians from becoming Rankians in the tropics, a rightful concern of Vries,¹⁵ as Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre tried to convert positivists into feverous adherents of the *Annales*.

Vries' final concern regards the somehow disappointing use of connectivity as the default for starting to understand processes in Global History. Here, Vries and I read the use of connectivity by the authors in *The Prospect of Global History* differently. The contention can be one of interpreting or understanding what connectivity stands for in Global History. As the discipline seeking to explain universal historical processes, Global History has two functions. The first is to explain how the same process appears in asymmetric contexts (in terms of sociological context, time, and

pp. 446–473, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139022460.019>; last accessed 7 December 2018.

12. Kevin H. O'Rourke, "The Economist and Global History", in Belich *et al.*, *The Prospect of Global History*, pp. 44–64.

13. Vries, "The Prospects", pp. 3–5.

14. Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien: Édition critique préparée par Étienne Bloch* (Paris, 1993), pp. 126–139.

15. Vries, "The Prospects", p. 10.

space), where the methodological principles of comparative history apply. The second seeks to explain the outcome of contacts and interactions between two (or more) social systems in history or universal historical processes, where the methodology suggested by Belich, Darwin, and Wickham offers an excellent entry point for construing Global History. If the former can be “easily” attained by diligently ploughing through secondary specialized literature, the latter is bound to demand a strong input of primary archival (written or unwritten, and material) sources.¹⁶ These two functions are not mutually exclusive and do not betray, in any measure or way, the primary conceptual markers of Global History as Vries and his co-authors defined in 2006. Nor do they conflict with the conceptual proposal by Belich *et al.* What is perhaps confronting for Vries and other global historians who stood at the forefront of the discipline’s development is that the contents of the universal historical processes that historians find worthy of including in Global History have moved away from the commensurability and eloquence of the debates surrounding the “Rise of the West” and the “Great Divergence” and away from economically minded subjects into a broader and, I would claim as an economic historian, richer pallet of processes to be contemplated.

I have been a practitioner of Global History for as long as Peer Vries has been a believer and appreciate enormously his capacity, and that of his peers, for taking on the task of explaining asymmetric universal historical processes with recourse to secondary specialized literature. In many ways, however, I continue to search for universal historical processes that I can perceive only through an in-depth study of primary sources from the perspective of interactions and connectivities across time, space, and social and cultural divides. For that, I am thankful for Belich *et al.*'s contribution to a strong methodological prescriptive approach to Global History. As well as helping me, I believe their proposal will similarly help a new generation of global historians to reflect on, define, and return to the essence of our *métier d'historien*.

16. T. Hodos, A. Geurds, P.J. Lane, I. Lilley, M. Pitts, G. Shelach-Lavi, M.T. Stark, and M.J. Versluys, *The Routledge Handbook of Archeology and Globalization* (London, 2016).