

Research Notes 【研究討論】

## World History in the Twenty-first Century and Its Critics

### 二十一世紀的世界史及其批判

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## Abstract

The paper deals with changes that recently occurred in the views of world history and with challenges coming from the post-modern approach and from subaltern studies. As far as world histories are concerned, it is evident that this subject per se has been deeply revised in a refreshing and innovative way. As historians, we all are, willy-nilly, influenced by the idea that the historian's responsibility is not so much the recuperation of the past, rather the construction of the past. We all are alert to the historicity of canons, and tend to be more sensitive to contaminations and hybrid texts than even in the recent past. In many cases, that are relevant to our understanding of world history, criticism of traditional historiography has gone beyond the quest for a renewal of research topics and descriptive strategies and has questioned basic assumptions of historiography. This radical challenge has implications that are worth discussing in depth.

## 摘要

本文旨在處理近年來世界史觀的改變，以及後現代研究方法與下層研究所帶來的挑戰。正如同世界史所被關心的焦點，此議題本身已深刻而明白地被修正為一個令人耳目一新的研究方式。做為歷史學家，不管願意或不願意，都受到「歷史學家的責任不僅只是恢復過去，還在於建構過去」此一觀點的影響。由此，我們對於經典的史實性更為警覺，也比過去對污損及雜匯的文本更加謹慎與敏感，因為這些都會與我們對世界史的理解產生關聯。傳統的歷史撰述已在不斷尋求研究議題及敘述策略的更新中，逐漸被人遺忘，且其基本假設也不斷地遭到質疑。這個激進的挑戰，使得這樣的議題值得被全面而深入地討論。

In 1970s one of the most cosmopolitan historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian Arnaldo Momigliano, wrote two short, brilliant essays that can be the points of departure for an analysis of the current state of world history writing and of its critics. In one essay, entitled “Historicism revisited”,<sup>1</sup> Momigliano pointed to a fundamental ambiguity of 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism.

Historicism is not a comfortable doctrine because it implies a danger of relativism. It tends to undermine the historian’s confidence in himself. True enough, Ranke who, among the nineteenth-century historians, is supposed to be the *Altvater* of Historicism, lived very comfortably. He seems to have felt no difficulty in relating the individual facts disclosed by the opening of the archives to the march of universal history. If God is in the individual facts, why should we care about universal history? If God is not in the individual facts, how can he be in universal history?<sup>2</sup>

In an another essay, entitled “A Piedmontese View of the History of Ideas”, which contrasted developments in the interest for history writing in Italy with parallel changes in attitudes in Europe and in the United States, Momigliano forcefully emphasized that “There is an inescapable question of truth, if the historian is to be a responsible actor in his own society and not a manipulator of opinions.”<sup>3</sup> There is a touch of irony in explicitly combining the extremely local reference to a small region, quite irrelevant to mass events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the ambition to encompass a view of the intricacies of intellectual history worldwide and an assessment of the contribution of history writing to the question of truth. Piedmont is in fact the region of Northern Italy, in which Momigliano was born. Here he grew up as a secularised Jew and studied philosophy and ancient history at the local university, before becoming a very young professor of ancient history at the University of Rome. He then had to leave Italy in 1939, because of the discriminatory anti-Jewish laws passed by Mussolini’s fas-

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<sup>1</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, “Historicism revisited,” (1974) in *Momigliano, Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1980), I, pp. 23-32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, “A Piemontese View of the History of Ideas,” in *Momigliano, Sesto contributo*, pp. 329-335, here 335.

cist government and made his career in England and later in the United States as one of the most prominent scholars in ancient history and in the history of historiography. He constantly searched for a comprehensive view of historical problems and events and relentlessly argued against a parochial view of the human past: no wonder that he found London and Chicago a more congenial environment than Italy.

His book *Alien Wisdom*, published in 1975, is evidence that even such a discipline as ancient history, with a heavy burden of interpretive tradition going back in its modern form to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century and with strict philological conventions, has always something new to tell us if properly interrogated. Momigliano stressed in this book both the interaction and the mutual indifference of the diverse cultures in the Mediterranean area in the centuries before Christ and wrote a brilliant piece of world history.

Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Isaiah, Heraclitus or Eschilus: probably this list would have astonished my grandfather and his generation. Nowadays it has a meaning: it is the symbol of the change that has taken place in our historical perspective. We are able to deal, more or less from the same point of view, with cultures that once seemed to be far away and we can find out something in common.<sup>4</sup>

Momigliano had already expressed this concern after the end of World War II, when he wrote in a letter to the Italian historian Federico Chabod that universal history

must be conceived of as a history of the problems of the past that are currently relevant: that is, as you say, in the Middle Ages, church and state, science, economic and social structure and so on. The difficulty in the chronological order may possibly be solved by inserting in every section (Greece, Rome, Middle Ages etc) an introductory chapter, entitled: the geographical and political setting of Greek (Roman, medieval) society or something similar, that should outline the political and therefore geographical changes in chronological sequence.

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<sup>4</sup> Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: the Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 157.

But, how do you solve the following question? Any universal history, it seems to me, includes an analysis of the crucial features of those nations with which we share the civilisation as well as an analysis of the outstanding features of those nations, in which, thanks to our civilisation, we recognise a common humanity. Greece and Rome interest us because they passed unto us crucial elements of our civilisation; but China and Japan interest us because, as human beings (“*grazie alla comune umanità*”), we recognise in them values of humanity. Obviously, the recognition of the values of humanity is the starting point for the unification of civilisation: it is the starting point, not the conclusion. In this sense universal history is a contribution to the universalization of history. Now, how do you want to combine these two aspects of a universal history, that is at the same time a history of our civilisation and a history of our humanity? In two respects I am sure that you agree with me. 1. A history of this kind should be preceded by a history of the idea of universal history, to make clear the goal [...], 2. The most important sources for every assessment should be given. Please let me stress the importance of this second point, because the vogue of unaccountable histories, where you never know on what assessments are founded, is dangerous. We run the risk of forgetting what the learned men of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have taught us: to care for the fact ascertained by the sources. It goes without saying that the sources relevant for a universal history are not the same as for the history of Athens in 465 BC.<sup>5</sup>

Why did Momigliano highlight the European element in his world view? Because a discussion on the increasing awareness of the global character of history, both in the past and in the future, could not conceal two facts that are the starting points for my paper: 1) In general hermeneutically we all have a specific perspective that is the individual precondition for acquiring information about ourselves, our world and our past. A perspective is the prerequisite for the writing of history as we know it, and 2) We all see a deep trend toward local identities emerging in different parts of the world interacting with the mutual bonds between areas and cultures that globalisation have brought about in the wake of

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<sup>5</sup> Federico Chabod Papers, Istituto Centrale per la Storia moderna e Contemporanea, Rome.

massive military, religious, cultural and commercial waves of expansion. I see these two points as crucial. Momigliano was in the end an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century historicist, deeply convinced, as we have seen, that the historical sciences have to do with truth: in complicated, sometimes ambiguous ways, to be sure. But, still, to him at the centre of any historical investigation there is a genuine search for something true about the past. He was also convinced that the history of historical research shows the different ways in which historians developed strategies to give sources a meaning that makes the whole epistemological endeavour of professional historians pregnant with a different and probably deeper significance than that provided by reading novels or listening to music.

It is important to stress that *Alien Wisdom*, Momigliano's masterpiece in the study of the interactions between different Mediterranean cultures, including the opportunities for interaction that were missed by crucial historical agents, is not an isolated essay. On the contrary, the notion of interaction, circulation of ideas and cultural transfer, gained in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a much wider acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

European historians in general have considered history in terms of national history since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That meant the progressive, one should say, teleological advance of national identities through history as embodiment of eternal national characters, based on the concentration of military and fiscal power in state institutions, entitled to exercise a growing set of rights of intervention within as well as beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Since the emergence of national movements in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution history writing has focused mainly on phenomena that stressed what was homogeneous within the national community (or, more often than not, what was imagined to be homogeneous) rather than pointing up the heterogeneous in the historical experience and the variety of ways in which cultures and groups can converge and mix. Heterogeneity was suspect; heterogeneity was an imperfection.

By doing this the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century historians markedly diverged from the men of the Enlightenment who were alert to the changes brought about by the contact with non European civilizations and eagerly looked for and welcomed evidence of the multifarious nature of men. This alertness corresponded to the experience of non European ideas and goods in everyday life of the upper classes. It was the negation of this approach to the varieties of historical devel-

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<sup>6</sup> *Globalization in World History*, edited by A. G. Hopkins (London, 2002).

opment that produced a distinctively Eurocentric and indeed racist interpretation of universal history and equated the history of Western Europe with the history of mankind so that history is inclusion of non-European cultures and identities into the holy circle of European progress.

Obvious political events have shown that an Eurocentric view has a very low explanatory potential and that racist perspectives have been the blueprint for mass murder. Universal histories have made way for a new notion of world history that deals explicitly and foremost with the interactive processes on different levels, from economy and trade to migrations to the spread of disease and of forms of popular culture.<sup>7</sup> While shifting the stress of research and narrative to the story of connections between the human community at given moments of its development, world history focuses on the investigation of quite long-term changes that were taken for granted by the traditional universal history writing.

World histories have not gone unchallenged and the epistemological as well as intellectual status of this discipline is still very much open to debate. The outright rejection of Eurocentric approaches to non European histories and to world history itself has become a central issue in theoretical discussions influenced by the post-modern approaches and especially by post-colonial and subaltern studies. As far as world histories are concerned, it is evident that this subject per se has been deeply revised in a refreshing and innovative way as a consequence of post-colonial attacks. Most historians have become, at least superficially or partially, post-modern citizens of a new republic of letters. The notion of covering laws that predict the future of humanity, based on an essentialist view of civilisations as in Huntington's recent oeuvre, has an evident political implication that defies any standard of scholarly integrity.<sup>8</sup>

As historians, we all are influenced by the idea that the historian's responsibility is not so much the recuperation of the past, rather the construction of the past. We all have become aware that language in general (and the historian's language in particular) reflects the power relationships within cultures and that an anti-authoritarian use of language is desirable. Similarly master narratives or meta-narratives that inform our understanding of the past can lead, and have ac-

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<sup>7</sup> Lutz Raphael, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeitalter der Extreme: Theorien, Methoden, Tendenzen von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart* (Muenchen: Beck, 2003), pp. 196-214.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

tually led, to serious mystifications and have imposed an artificial and linear temporality that runs against our perception that time has gaps, discontinuities, ruptures that history writing ought to recapture.

We all are alert to the historicity of canons, and tend to be more sensitive to contaminations and hybrid texts than even in the recent past. Besides the now controversial notion of canon, the medium itself of written language has come under attack. Films, according to Vivian Sobchak, have acquired a palimpsestic character that de facto structures our understanding of the past, just like paintings, engravings and carvings in medieval churches informed historical consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Many historians of different brands have found inspiration in Foucault's suggestion that history writing has celebrated the victory of the bourgeois subject and it is high time to deconstruct it in order to "give voice" to the marginalized human beings who have been erased in canonical texts. Subaltern and feminist studies do derive their *raison d'être* from this epistemological and moral position.

In many cases, that are relevant to our understanding of world history, criticism of traditional historiography has gone beyond the quest for a renewal of research topics and descriptive strategies and has questioned basic assumptions of historiography. Challenges to the traditional approach always attract attention as they can be productive of original insights. It is surprising therefore that Patrick Manning in his *Navigating World History* has written that "World history, as a new field of scholarship, is relatively innocent of debate."<sup>10</sup> The contrary is the case. Heavy-handed criticism of the notion itself of world history has been expressed especially by those historians who articulate the concerns brought about in the wake of the unification of the world.

I will take first Arif Dirlik as particularly representative of the critical intellectuals, both in the United States and in Asian countries, who champion a radical position, not just an alternative world history that takes into account the transformations in our perception of both social reality and language, but an alternative to history. As this position has implications for the limited community of historians as well as for the general public, it is worth examining. According

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<sup>9</sup> Vivian Sobchak, "The Insistent Fringe: Moving Images and Historical Consciousness," *History and Theory*, 36, no. 4 (1997), pp. 4-20.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 255.

to Dirlik, world history shows clearly that writing history is all about constructing it, as the question of selecting and interpreting sources plays no role in world history, given its scope and its inability to define its boundaries. It is therefore wrong to affirm, as Bright and Geyer have done, that “Historians no longer have to invent the world in order to study world history.”<sup>11</sup> What world historians study is in fact the triumph of globalization and what they endorse is the renunciation of any critical awareness that there are alternative perspectives to those of its promoters. As it privileges time over space, world history necessarily abolishes all local temporalities. As it identifies with the winners, it necessarily abolishes local logics and is therefore a product of a Eurocentric ordering of the world’s spatialities, temporalities and power relationships. World history is the final result of the massive accumulation of knowledge about the world that Europe and later the product of the European diaspora, that is North America, has started in order to subjugate the rest of the world. Here, the very essence of world history is Eurocentric and its categories are intimately flawed even when they are challenged and revised. I quote Arlif: “It is arguable nevertheless that for all its pretensions to a greater even-handed comprehensiveness than earlier, contemporary world or global historiography is no more comprehensive in its coverage of the world than the globalization it claims as its inspiration - and legitimacy”.<sup>12</sup> Any repudiation of Eurocentric teleology is thus deceiving: history itself is a fundamental expression of Eurocentrism, together with science and developmentalism. The Indian psychologist Ashis Nandy has argued in a well known essay that historical consciousness “once exported to the nonmodern world, has not only tended to absolutize the past in cultures that lived with open-ended concepts of the past or depended on myths, legends, and epics to define their cultural selves, it has also made the historical worldview complicit with many new forms of violence, exploitation and Satanism in our times and helped rigidify civilizational, cultural, and national boundaries.”<sup>13</sup>

In a similar vein Vinay Lal has very recently argued that world history “has every potential to be a form of ‘cultural genocide’, politically disempowering,

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<sup>11</sup> C. Bright-Michael Geyer, “Globalgeschichte und die Einheit der Welt im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Comparativ*, 4, no. 5 (1994), pp. 13-45.

<sup>12</sup> Arif Dirlik, “Confounding Metaphors, Inventions of the World: What is World History For?” in *Writing World History 1800-2000*, edited by Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs (Oxford: German Historical Institute London-Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 124

<sup>13</sup> Ashis Nandy, “History’s Forgotten Doubles,” *History and Theory*, 34, no. 2 (1995), p. 44.

and destructive of the ecological plurality of knowledges and lifestyles.”<sup>14</sup> The case of Hindu India and “her rejection of history as a way of knowing” shows the existence and indeed the legitimacy of a different epistemology that coincides with the not-writing of history, because this rejection of history is a mode of living with the present.<sup>15</sup> Lal endorses the view that “history is servitude; and it is this view, which has found its greatest exponent in Gandhi - the real one, not his unpropitiously named namesakes who were bent on bringing India into the orbit of world history - which must principally account for why Hindu civilization chose not to produce a historiographical tradition.”<sup>16</sup> “History is the new dogmatism; and as a dogma, as well as a mode of conquest, it is more unremitting and total than science, which has had its detractors from the very beginning ... The abandonment of history may well be the only heresy that remains to us, for that defiance is nothing other than the defiance of the categories of knowledge which have become the most effective and oppressive means of oppressing mankind today.”<sup>17</sup>

Dirlik and Lal, however extreme their assumptions may appear, are not isolated. In his *History at the Limits of World History*, Ranajit Guha has expressed similar concerns and has contrasted the imposition of British (ultimately European) historiography on India and the poverty of this historiography with the creative and evocative Indian notion of a deep and pervasive sense of history which can emulate literature to look afresh at life in order to recuperate the historicity of what is humble and habitual.<sup>18</sup>

These are serious charges and should be taken seriously, both on the epistemological and on the moral level. On this occasion, I would like to raise two points that challenge the assumption of the radical attack on world history. The first concerns the ideological character of world history per se. The Eurocentric approach has been the outcome of the European expansion all over the world and served as one justification among many others for all sorts of crimes. It cer-

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<sup>14</sup> Vinay Lal, “Provincializing the West: World History from the Perspective of Indian History,” in *Writing World History*, p. 289.

<sup>15</sup> Lal, “The History of Ahistoricity,” in Lal, *The History of History. Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

tainly originated in the Christian view of history as the fulfilment of God's intentions, however deconsecrated. But it must be stressed that the repudiation of a Eurocentric world history has originated in the European culture itself, early and more vehemently than in the cultures that have been victims of the European colonization. Its repudiation coincided with a secularized approach to man and to the social and natural world. This gives European historical culture no moral primacy, to be sure, but it is evidence that poison and antidote may be found in the same cultural tradition, at least potentially.<sup>19</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincializing Europe* has expressed a similar attitude when stating at the outset of his analysis that the Marxist and liberal thought are legatees of the quintessentially European Enlightenment and that this heritage "is now global".<sup>20</sup>

Critique of all possible European crimes and appeal to redress them is very likely to be framed in a language and according to an agenda deeply committed to the universalist approach to world history first conceived in the Enlightenment. We all write from within this inheritance. But certainly this intellectual heritage, entailing as it does both an historical perspective and a political reform programme, is bound to yield a variety of approaches.

World history writing is no exception. Recent world histories, however insufficient from a variety of points of view - from *The History and Geography of Human Genes*, a diachronical atlas of the dissemination of men across the continents by a team of Italian genetists based at Stanford University to Fernández-Armesto's *Millenium* to the recent *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History* by the McNeills, senior and junior, - show that world histories that share a "traditional" approach to the question of how to narrate the development of mankind across time and space can in fact be written in very different ways and that historians, however biased individually, fulfil quite different agendas and have different narrative and epistemological skills and know-how.<sup>21</sup> While it is true that globalization has increasingly motivated histo

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<sup>19</sup> A perceptive treatment of this dilemma is to be found in Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover-London: University Press of New England, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Luigi L. Cavalli-Sforza-Alberto Piazza-Paolo Menozzi, *The History and Geography of Human Genes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); F. Fernández-Armesto, *Millenium* (London: Bantam Press, 1995); John R. McNeill- William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: a Bird's Eye View of World History* (New York-London: Norton, 2003).

rians to reflect on and do research about world history, it is hardly acceptable to argue that all different world histories can be subsumed under the same point of view. As Momigliano would have said, and despite objections to the contrary, the Piedmontese view has its own peculiarities and has the same right to be expressed and taken seriously by the scientific community, provided that certain, agreed upon rules are complied with. Historical cultures have given up or are supposed to have given up the persuasion of being the only one that is able to conceive the historicity of collective experiences. The self-reflective potential in all historical cultures - including the European historical culture - cannot be ignored.

A second point concerns the legitimacy of historical writing and research as a specific mode of knowledge. Asking for a verifiable, source-based narration is a prerequisite of any historiographic product. Certain methodological assumptions, however constantly subject to debate and redefinition, make up the common field of the historical discourse which is tread upon by both the academic historians and the outsiders who allegedly claim the insufficiency or the illegitimacy of those methodological assumptions. The Oxford historian Oswyn Murray has brilliantly asserted that history is the myth of the polis. This definition does not absolutize the importance of history in our experience nor does it cast doubt on its legitimacy, but stresses the rational element that makes answers to those questions possible if not infallible and acknowledges that history itself is a historical product.

World history writing is particularly relevant in this debate as it represents one of the attractive and indeed viable alternatives to the national histories that are now increasingly perceived as obsolete. It will also become a litmus test for the reassessment of the selection and use of sources for the narrative that is epistemologically essential to history writing. And finally, despite strictures on that account, it will give opportunity to rationally criticize that same process of increasing interconnections and defining new ways of social life and cultural identities that it intends to reconstruct.