

Writing History in the Global Era

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Lynn Hunt's new book, *Writing History in the Global Era*, places an important question on the table: 'Is globalization the new theory that will reinvigorate history? Or will it choke off all other possible contenders, leaving in place only the inevitability of modernization of the world on the Western model?' (p. 1) She asks 'is globalization a new paradigm for historical explanation that replaces those criticized by cultural theories? Or is it a Trojan horse that threatens to bring back old paradigms rather than offering a truly new one?' (p. 52).

Writing History in the Global Era offers an important reflection on the contexts that are reconfiguring the landscapes of history; in particular Hunt analyses the reasons for and implications of the rise in global history, and in particular the use of globalisation as an explanatory framework. Hunt points out that history has always been the handmaiden of some political agenda; she describes history's 'symbiotic relationship with nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (p. 3), and surveys the ways in which history curriculum changes in the 20th century reflected social and political changes. Hunt argues that the increased use of the globalization paradigm as an explanatory framework is reflective of the ideological shake-up of the end of the Cold War as well as the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of the world. Hunt contends that the globalization paradigm stepped into the vacuum created by the collapse of earlier paradigms, and deconstructions, or limitations, of earlier social and cultural theories. She argues that as other paradigms such as Marxism, modernization, the Annales school, and identity politics were rejected the globalization paradigm stepped in, and 'historians need to contest the terrain it now claims, using the tools held out by cultural theories while remaining mindful of their limitations' (p. 43).

The reader gains a sense of the importance and relevance of Hunt's argument as she warns that the focus on the global frame of reference is not always the most relevant one, and risks casting a shadow over crucial categories such as 'society' and 'self'. This echoes Archibald MacLeish's anxieties about the Earthrise photographs that are often seen as the start of global history; MacLeish wrote 'the medieval notion of the earth put man at the center of everything. The nuclear notion of the earth put him nowhere – beyond the range of reason even – lost in absurdity and war'.⁽¹⁾ Hunt suggests that historians need to integrate pre-existing social and cultural theories in addition to new global frameworks in order to develop new perspectives on history. The argument in the book is clear, and Hunt powerfully makes the case for the need

to not throw the baby out with the bath water and to remember the reasons for, and benefits of, earlier intellectual advances in historiography which may provide the critical tools for analysing the ideological implications of the globalization paradigm.

Hunt indicates the limitations of the globalization paradigm which 'asserts the inescapability of the process, the primacy of economics in driving it, and the desirability of research focused economic factors' (p. 55). However, unfortunately she stops short of pointing fingers at contemporary perpetrators of this paradigm. Instead Hunt cites Cátia Antunes' delineation of the current models for historical research into globalization: 'Braudel's notion of total history, Immanuel Wallerstein's focus on world systems, and Andre Gunder Frank's attempt to "reorient" thinking about globalization to pay greater attention to Asia, especially China' pp. 55–6). Hunt warns that 'the absorption of three of the previous paradigms of historical research into one overarching globalization paradigm has two potentially troubling consequences: it shifts attention to macro-historical (worldwide) and especially macroeconomic trends, and it ensconces the assumption that economics shapes all other aspects of life. In short, the globalization paradigm reinstates the very suppositions that cultural theories had criticized, and thus potentially threatens to wash away the gains of the last decades of cultural history' (p. 59). The argument is persuasive, but would benefit from a closer analysis of where and how the globalization paradigm is operating in recent histories. However, Hunt does refer to the 'bottom-up perspective' on globalization produced in recent Early Modern histories of globalization, which she argues 'make it possible to revise the globalization paradigm in fundamental ways' as 'economic motivation need no longer be considered inherently primary' (p. 68). Here she articulates a reoccurring argument of her book, that there is not just the need to reintroduce social and cultural theories and question the globalization paradigm, but also a need to question the focus on economic forces in shaping historic processes. As an example of an alternative approach Hunt observes the need to focus on the role of religion in shaping globalization, rather than the other way around (p. 73). Further, and perhaps most significantly, Hunt makes the case for the importance of the 'bottom-up perspective' on globalization since this can counter 'the notion globalization is another name for modernization, that is, for the homogenization of the world through the circulation, absorption, and imposition of Western values' (p. 69).

Hunt integrates what she calls the 'globalization paradigm' into the history of historiography, but is less clear about where exactly this paradigm is located, especially in relation to the broader field of global history. The reader is left wondering whether Hunt takes the globalization paradigm to be synonymous with global history, but she does not refer to the historiographical debates on the meanings and forms of global history. Hunt comments on the rise of world history (p. 50), but does not indicate how (or if) this field is independent from the globalization paradigm. Later Hunt states that 'world or global history' (and here the distinction is not clear) have a 'top-down perspective' on globalization' (p. 60). This implies that Hunt sees all world and global histories as histories of globalization, and again examples of how this unfolds in new global histories would help extend the analysis. Hunt's interrogation of the globalization paradigm is important, yet global histories do not always reproduce the narrative of globalization but can also reflect upon the different impressions of the world that been developed at different times for different purposes – for example Duncan Bell's chapter on 'world-making' in Moyn and Sartori's *Global Intellectual History* and Denis Cosgrove's *Apollo's Eye: a Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*.⁽²⁾ In these examples the global concept is more an act of imagination than a scale of analysis. Further interrogation of the locations and guises of the globalization paradigm would assist Hunt's analysis since, just as not all global histories are the history of globalization, other histories that don't appear to be global histories can be informed by the meta-narrative of globalization. This is an important distinction since Hunt's criticism of the globalization paradigm is not a criticism of historical genre, but of ideology.

Hunt does observe that the globalization paradigm has other critics. She cites the work of the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano who has offered an alternative anti-Eurocentric history of the origins of globalization, focusing on the Americas rather than Europe (p. 61). However, relocating the origin of globalization does not serve Hunt's agenda of challenging the paradigm of globalization. Crucially, Hunt observes 'in the attempt to criticize Eurocentrism, he thus ends up making the "eurocentricity" of world capitalism seem inevitable. Economics triumphs once again' (p. 62). Hunt also explores the benefits and

shortcomings of the work of Walter D. Mignolo, author of *Local Histories/Global Designs*, observing that Mignolo 'is among those who reject any universalist position [such as globalization] because it can represent nothing other than the reiteration of the hegemony of Western civilization. He advocates "diversality, a project that is an alternative to universality and offers the possibilities of a network of planetary [worldwide] confrontations with globalization in the name of justice, equity, human rights and epistemic diversity". The sentiments might be laudatory in their anti-Eurocentrism, but Mignolo fails to explain what authorizes the notions of justice, equity, human rights, and epistemic diversality' (p. 71). This insightful criticism begins to map the minefield of problems faced by critics of the globalization paradigm. This criticism also echoes Hunt's introductory warning that 'seeing cannot take place without a standpoint' (p. 11).

Hunt's book acts as an important reminder to historians to reflect on the composition of the foundations of their own standpoint as they look into history in the 'global era'. Hunt gets to the core of globalization and its increasing prominence in historiography by identifying it as a paradigm which she defines as 'an overarching account or meta-narrative of historical development that includes 1) a hierarchy of factors that determine meaning, and that hierarchy in turn sets 2) an agenda for research, that is, shapes the choice of problems deemed worthy of study as well as the approaches considered appropriate to use to carry out those studies' (pp. 13-14). This definition facilitates the distancing that is essential for reflecting upon the politics and structures of globalization narratives. And yet the book also carries a sense, especially in chapter two 'The challenge of globalization', that there is a global scale and a definable process of globalization, a 'process by which the world becomes more interconnected and more interdependent' (p. 52), to which historians are responding. In chapter two, 'The rise and fall of cultural theories', Hunt surveys the intellectual advances and limitations of the 'postmodernist' theories of Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes, thinking about the importance of advances in understandings of language, the self, and society in the cultural turn. These topics are expanded upon in chapter three, 'Rethinking society and the self'. And yet, perhaps it would also be useful to integrate the globalization paradigm with the historiography of the spatial turn as well as the cultural. Considering Henri Lefebvre's work on the relationship between abstract and social space could ease the contradiction that sometimes arises in historiographical discussions about global history and globalization regarding the way in which the global and globalization can appear as both subject and object. Hunt takes some steps in this direction, noting the way in which 'globalization draws attention to the ways changing experiences of space and time alter social relations and with them concepts of the self and other' (p. 80). Hunt's short book opens important analytic territory and is just the beginning of the reflection on the standpoint of the 'global era'.

Hunt warns that history is in crisis but she makes a valiant defence of its importance, arguing that 'the constant evolution of the purpose of history is a sign, rather, of its vitality' (p. 11). Hunt steers a difficult course across choppy historiographical waters. She identifies an opportunity for historians to engineer a new historical perspective, one that is critically aware of its paradigm of operation, that uses the tools of social and cultural theories, and that responds to the new global era. While Hunt observes the dangers of the globalization paradigm permeating global and world histories, she also observes that 'current events such as the 'war on terror', the rise of China, and the global economic crisis have encouraged a global view' (p. 60) to which historians must respond. Hunt also notes the importance of the global perspective for relativizing the role of the West in history, the way in which global history can help history break out of its national confines, and the questioning of periodization. Hunt comments that while 'history will continue to serve nation-building and identity politics because nation-states still provide the frame for much of political and social life', there is hope for change as 'at the same time history's purposes are expanding as we increasingly think of ourselves as humans sharing with each other and with other species a common planetary past and future' (pp. 119-20). However, historians should also ask whose vision of the 'common planet' is being represented. Hunt accepts that historians keep returning to ask big questions, but cites Sanyal Subrahmanyam's warning that we must stop asking the wrong big questions: 'We must abandon the developmental perspective that comes down to us with two fathers (Marx and W. W. Rostow), and which believes that the only question worth asking is that of Who Succeeded and Who Failed on the long road to modern industrial capitalism, from a list of modern nation-states' (p. 62). In short, Hunt's identification of

globalization as a paradigm establishes the foundations for analysing the meanings and implications of globalization narratives. Most importantly the work acts as a warning against reification of economic forces in historical process and the stealthy reintroduction of older historical paradigms, not least the teleological narratives of modernization.

Notes

1. Archibald MacLeish, 'Riders on the earth together, brothers in eternal cold' (1968), in *Riders on the Earth: Essays and Reflections* (Boston, MA, 1978), p. 42; cited *Global Intellectual History*, ed. in S. Moyne and A. Sartori (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 254–79, pp. 269–70. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Duncan Bell, 'Making and Taking Worlds', in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. S. Moyne and A. Sartori (New York, NY, 2013), and Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: a cartographic genealogy of the earth in the western imagination* (Baltimore, MD, 2001). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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