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# Liquid Spaces in Modern Historiography

It is astonishing how much the ranges and spaces of history have changed and extended in the past generation of historical research. In what follows I will present, and attempt to explain, some key categories of recent historical writing in ‘the West.’ In hindsight, they document a tendency toward spatial concepts and disciplinary boundaries becoming more and more *liquid*. These are, in order of their appearance: the history of everyday life, the comparative history of nations, international history, history of international organizations, history of globalization, colonial history, transnational history, entangled history, global history, universal history, area studies, glocalization, and finally big history. My discussion will be conducted from a Central European viewpoint, and, I admit, this may narrow or confine my scope. To conclude, I will add some observations about the intersections of general and cultural histories, and will dare to look upon what appears to be relevant in the near future with regard to methodology and to contents.

## 1 Histories Going Global

When, in the early 1980s, I began to study the science of history, the specter of the Cold War still lingered. It was marked by an immobile, almost static conception of time, and an apparent distinctness of spatial borderlines and ideological frontiers (Leffler and Westad 2010). Germany was divided into separate political systems, and East- and West-German historians were primarily concerned about their respective national backgrounds, researching their own pasts and their liberal or socialist traditions. Historical interest tended to focus more on smaller sections of the German society and minor units of national spaces: The order of the day was the history of everyday life, granting common people their share in suffering, and in the shaping of history.

In this historical examination of one’s local region, city, neighborhood, or workplace, many amateur and professional researchers discovered – not to everybody’s surprise – that women had also participated in history, as did people beyond the ruling or propertied classes, members of minorities, and outsiders. In these years, it seemed that anything concrete and exemplary for a distinct historical place, person, or case study roused public interest. Little was changed concerning national boundaries in the 1980s, but historical spaces were opened up in a more and more refined way, zooming into smaller levels of investigation.

While a few methodological suggestions from beyond national borders were taken up and incorporated into German research strategies during the 1980s – for instance, the *history of everyday life* or *from below* came from Sweden or the United States, France, Italy, or Great Britain (van Laak 2003) – German historical research of that era still remained largely within national confines. Very few German historians actually followed the history of international relations and even fewer were interested in world history, which, rather, was assessed a special interest of eccentrics. In the later 1980s, a long-lasting dispute among German historians was staged as to the legitimacy of comparing National Socialism to Stalinism. For different reasons, many renowned representatives of the historians' guild rejected the acceptability and logic of such comparisons (see Augstein 1987).

This, however, changed in the years following the dramatic upheaval of 1989–90. When the wall between East and West Germany came down, I was at home studying for my final exams at the university. Accordingly, I paid very little attention to the epic events taking place in Berlin and elsewhere: Even historians are not always aware of history as it actually happens. My academic thesis was devoted to certain aspects of German fascism and to the persecution of the German Jews, and it was exemplified by the cities in which I had grown up. In my ensuing dissertation, which was again dedicated to an aspect of German history but also went beyond a German setting, I turned my attention to a broader scope, focusing on a law professor who was famous throughout Europe, the United States, and even Japan (van Laak 1993). My first professional position at a university led me to Jena, a city that prior to 1989 had existed under the socialist system. In Jena, I gathered many experiences and gained insights on what the dissolving of borderlines entails: for instance, how this leads to cultural amalgamations and hybrids, but also to new kinds of social segregation. Seen from today's perspective, what happened in Jena was something like a transnational integration within a national framework.

For a certain period during the early 1990s, people tended to believe that the fatal history of the twentieth century – with all its brutal wars and ideological confrontation – would come to a definite end, and expected that an era would arise in which nations and states would cooperate peacefully, and would not challenge existing borders. The concept of the nation-state and its associated nationalism was rarely questioned even by historians, although they already had recognized that since the eighteenth century, national traditions had often been invented from close to scratch (Gellner 1983). More and more historians did, however, embark upon comparing with each other the histories of nations as they had established since the nineteenth century (Kaelble 1999).

For the “age of extremes” – that is, the short twentieth century, as Eric Hobsbawm labeled it – it actually did make sense to compare national histories

(Hobsbawm 1995). In 1989–90, a distinct era appeared to reach its conclusion, and was in anticipation of becoming historicized. During my working years in Jena, I witnessed many historical myths of the former German Democratic Republic being challenged and liquefied (see, for instance, Niethammer 1995). Those who had to adapt to the Western political and economic system constantly compared the histories of East and West Germany (Kleßmann, Misselwitz, and Wichert 1999). When they asked what had kept the histories of both societies together despite more than 40 years of separation, the answer turned out to be much more than many analysts initially believed (Wengst and Wentker 2008). Additionally, during the 1990s, the European (Economic) Community – which since the 1950s had evolved and developed rather slowly – suddenly expanded vigorously. Following the *Treaty of Maastricht* in 1992, the European Union was established, and was quickly implemented by many (East-)European countries (Loth 2014). However this process is evaluated in detail, Europeans were quite amazed to learn about and actually experience falling borders, more freedom and mobility, and formerly separated societies moving closer together. In the formation of the European Union, Europeans came to understand that they shared political and economic interests with countries that previously had appeared quite distant and inaccessible. Together with immigration from very different countries – and influences from postcolonial thought (Said 1978, 1993) – this generated disputes on how to deal with and encompass cultural differences. It would be misleading, though, to state that Germans, Spaniards, or Italians of today are exceedingly interested in neighboring countries or their histories: this is just the case for selected people. But no European citizen can dismiss the fact that more Germans, Spaniards, and Italians travel to their respective countries than ever before, that work migration is rising, and that there now exists a soaring interdependence in economic and administrative systems.

Nevertheless, in European countries the prevailing concepts of history still follow national orientations and confines. This path dependency is due to the fact that modern historiography came along *with* and was marked *by* the creation of nation states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Conrad and Conrad 2002; Duchhardt 2006; Berger 2007; Carvalho and Gemenne 2009). The writing of history was even seen as a kind of auxiliary science of building up a nation state, and establishing grand national narratives effectively contributed to the creation of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Largely for this reason, many politicians and historians of today still pretend nation states to be something like the principal unit of history, based on a clear-cut territory, an integrated language and culture, and, last but not least, an ethnically coherent population (Smith 2001; Wehler 2011).

However, with the possible exception of isolated locations like Iceland, such consistency in a nation has never existed in history. Rather, it was the other way around: Attempts to unite all of these factors into unique and independent national bodies must be ranked among the most violent aspects of recent history. Such efforts have led to forceful relocations of borders, to the displacement of peoples, to absurd actions like ‘ethnic cleansing,’ and subsequently to much suffering. Recent research has quite bluntly revealed just how the idea of the nation state, and also the purported ‘right of self-determination’ proclaimed after World War I, would entail a lot of very violent outcomes (Manela 2007).

It is almost a natural consequence that the 1990s sparked renewed interest in *international history* in its classic sense, a history of international relations. The clear frontiers of the global Cold War had dissolved and were replaced by a situation that longed for the analysis and explanation that history could provide (Loth and Osterhammel 2000). Why, for instance, did a country like Yugoslavia split, break down so violently, and sink into war, in a process that Europe – luckily – had not seen for more than 50 years? The international situation changed fundamentally, not just for Europeans or the dissolving Eastern and Western Blocs, but for the countries in the Global South as well. Before decolonization, Eastern and Western Blocs had courted them for a generation; now, they were almost left alone to subsequently pursue a status of being non-aligned (Prashad 2008; Westad 2007; Sluga 2013). International history predominantly revolves around conflicts and cooperation among nation states, but during the 1990s it was faced with a historically incomparable situation. So, in the end, it could not really contribute much to our understanding, and it experienced just a temporary boom.

For the modern phenomenon of *internationalism* this was different. Internationalism was mainly rooted in the nineteenth century and was sparked anew by the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s. What is *not* meant here are political movements like communism or socialism. Internationalism as it is understood here was marked by the realization in the nineteenth century that increasing technology, science, travel, and exchange of goods had a tendency to integrate mankind, and that there should be people or agents to organize and moderate this process in a peacekeeping and humanitarian direction (Geyer and Paulmann 2001). Institutions like the International Red Cross, the International Postal Union, news agencies like Reuters or Agence France Press, or initiatives to implement a common international language like Esperanto or Volapük were particularly persuasive. Compared to the often-ostensible actions of statesmen and politicians, their activities were indeed obscured and disregarded by historians for too long (Gorman 2012; Housden 2012; Löhr and Wenzlhuemer 2013). After the Cold War’s demise it became more and more evident that the security and stability of the international order was fundamentally based on and depended upon

shared international interests, and these agencies of international cooperation have exactly promoted that for many decades (Schot and Lagendijk 2008; Badenoch and Fickers 2010). Consequently, the history of internationalism, of human rights, of the international fights against slavery, against epidemics, or for the protection of the environment presently ranks among the most vivid and expanding branches of historical research. Part of it is the *history of international organizations*, which are neither engaged nor authorized by governments. Instead, they act as independent individuals or agencies beyond and across national borders, e.g. technical or scientific associations or international conferences, which took place to exchange and coordinate knowledge internationally (Iryie 2002; Herren 2009; MacKenzie 2010).

This renewed interest in internationalism was accompanied by a *history of globalization*. In dictionaries, the term ‘globalization’ emerged not earlier than during the 1960s to denote processes that before had been characterized as ‘world politics,’ ‘world interior policy,’ ‘internationalization,’ ‘one world,’ or equivalents.<sup>1</sup> The history of globalization addresses actions and endeavors to progressively entangle nations, regions, or continents that had previously lived in a more separated state. This is first of all a history of travelers, discoverers, and explorers, mainly in parts of the world that until then were foreign and unknown; it is a history of collecting things and knowledge about places and people that Europeans often assessed as ‘exotic’ (Pratt 1992; Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop 1998). On another level, the history of globalization is a story of the intensified exchange of people, goods, ideas, and information across existing or imagined borders. It is a history of economic, political, and cultural transfers, a history of creative adaptation, adoption, and interaction, and also a history of backlashes within those groups of people that have initiated all this (Stuchtey 2004; Raj 2007). The history of globalization identifies periods in which these processes of entanglement and interaction tremendously accelerated – for example, the late nineteenth century – and periods in which such an exchange stagnated or even decreased, like in the Interwar years or during Cold War years with respect to the ‘Iron Curtain.’

The history of globalization raises questions concerning the causes, the ranges, and the effects of networks and interconnectedness. It is world history in a specific sense; it takes its point of departure from the matter of fact that the globe of today is interconnected, and it asks how, historically, this came into reality (Mattelard 2000). Following a definition by Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels

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1 The term ‘global village’ was coined by Marshall McLuhan 1964.

Petersson, it is concerned with the “expansion, consolidation and speeding-up of global connections” (Osterhammel and Petersson 2003, 10).

Social protest and critique provided a major stimulus for taking up and further developing this perspective. The obvious power of globalization in particular – which often appears to be irresistible, subordinating individuals or even governments – provoked questions on who or which power actually was behind all of this. Since Karl Marx, this was often answered by pointing at internationally operating business interests or trusts, to multinational banks or enterprises, which allegedly sought financial benefits and left behind their loyalty to home countries as well as social responsibilities (Barber 1995; Winseck and Pike 2007). I will not decide here whether or not that is true, but I will point out that there is a relatively new and telling differentiation being made often in recent historiography, which is the distinction between winners and losers of globalization. To highlight effects like these only makes sense, however, if one understands globalization as a process that is manmade, and that is neither natural nor irreversible.

Returning to myself again here: In my academic career, I have approached global questions like many others did, addressing a specific aspect of global entanglement in turning towards *colonial history* (van Laak 2004). For a long time, in Germany it had almost been forgotten that from 1884 to 1914 the German Empire had ‘possessed’ a range of colonies in Africa and in the Southern Pacific. Colonial history is a part of most national histories in Europe, even in countries like Belgium, Denmark, or Switzerland (Purtschert, Lüthi, and Falk 2012), but first of all and primarily it plays a very powerful role in the story of globalization. Colonialism developed from the exploration of foreign territories, and it aimed at appropriating and subduing those territories and the people living in them.

Seen from the perspective of governance, colonial policy was a failure in almost every respect, and during the era of decolonization after 1945, colonial rule could be abolished almost everywhere in the world. However, during the preceding era of imperialism, which was full of conflicts, *both* the colonizing and the colonized societies were deeply altered. This can also be recognized with respect to Germany, even though its involvement in colonial policy compared to France, Great Britain, or the Netherlands did not last for long (van Laak 2005).

In 2014, and together with students at Giessen University, I embarked upon tracing the imprints that German colonialism left in the history of Hesse. Among other stories, we found out that one of the most important schools for the education of colonial farmers and settlers was opened in 1898 quite close to Giessen, in the small city of Witzenhausen, north of Kassel. The school still exists today, of course not as a colonial training center, but as part of the University of Kassel; it instructs in tropical and subtropical farming, and among its students of today are many Africans and Asians (Linne 2017). We also found out that a lot of memorials,

street names, or places that refer to colonialists or other colonial aspects still exist, as do museum collections generated in the era of German colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

Our research, which mixed together the global and the local, conveyed exactly what often makes the history of globalization surprising: It accounts for the fact that our present world is deeply permeated by global references even to the remotest places, and these references often document a long and complex prehistory. To give an example: For many centuries we have enjoyed foods that originate in other continents, yet we are rarely aware of the twisted roads these foods have taken to please us today: coffee and tea, spices, sugar and salt, fruits and cereals, tobacco and textiles, fish and meat, oil and timber, and many other products had to travel far and long to finally become an everyday matter of course for Europeans (Wendt 2007).

If we apply historical perspectives to these flows of people, ideas, and commodity chains, often very exciting stories emerge. Take, for instance, the triangle trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, in which money, goods, and slaves were exchanged, or the extended routes that many plants, crops, or animals have taken to become domesticated and acclimatized in very different places. Quite generally, the hunger for resources – be it gold or diamonds, foodstuffs or rare metal – was a kind of *leitmotif* for transcending existing borders, for appropriating different objects, for subduing foreign people, for influencing them to work for the Europeans, or for simply establishing trade. These actions are salient subjects of *transnational history*, which furthermore has been driven by interventions into the natural habitat, by the building up of facilities for travel and communication, by the transfer of goods and ideas, or by environmental disasters as generated by industrialization or global touristification.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these global and transnational aspects formerly were odd subjects for historical research because they were focused on national units, and because actors and agents therein were neither governmental nor confined within given borders. For a couple of years, historians have discussed the methodology of a ‘histoire croisée’ or *entangled history* (Werner and Zimmermann 2002). It tries to explain processes of interaction among actors of different localities and cultures, by which all involved actors are challenged. Often, something happens that has been called ‘hybridization,’ something that none of the involved actors actually has intended. It absorbs and transforms elements from all involved cultures, but

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<sup>2</sup> See <[www.inst.uni-giessen.de/hessen-postkolonial](http://www.inst.uni-giessen.de/hessen-postkolonial)> [accessed: 5 June 2019].

<sup>3</sup> A great example of ‘new’ stories to be told from this perspective are Iriye and Saunier 2009 and Espagne, Geyer, and Middell 2010.

at the same time represents something that has a quality of being new and sovereign (Fischer-Tiné 2013).

This said, it is crucial to characterize *global history* as separate from the history of globalization. This approach can be understood as a more general invitation to add historical dimensions and narrations to the existing *one world* of today.<sup>4</sup> This offer, however, involves a lot of questions and problems. For instance: Do we have to imagine global history as a kind of history that converges towards an integrated and homogeneous world? And what will this unified world eventually look like?

Asking questions like these moves global history very close to the *universal history* approaches of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when world history was conceptualized and written with philosophical aspiration. Writers like August Ludwig von Schlözer, Friedrich Schiller, or Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel assessed history as a gradual fulfillment of human rights, freedom, peace, democracy, and equality. Taking a similar attitude, some recent macro-sociologists have suggested space and time being categories of the past, not of the future, wherein everything would merge and become networked into a global system, which would eventually be defined by coexistence, connections, and synchrony (Castells 1996; Khannah 2016).

However, there is more evidence that global history does *not* evolve toward a synthetic or certain goal, but should instead be viewed as something that neither develops in a straight line nor with purpose. It displays many rupture zones, as nation states and empires rise and fall, territories seem to return to oblivion like in some parts of Africa, former centers again become provincialized, etc. Global history is especially considerate of activities that constantly change without arriving anywhere, which is why the transfer and migration of people, ideas, goods, and things are saliently represented in it to such an extent (Middell and Engel 2005).

Seen from this perspective, the problem arises as to whether ‘natural borders’ in fact do exist, or whether this concept is a fixed idea of a certain time or specific interests (Butlin 2009). The political geography of the late nineteenth century had stressed this notion of ‘natural borders’ to legitimize the expansion of nation states and the manipulation of existing borderlines, but in fact, borders can be justified almost exclusively by arguing historically. Globalization and the definition of national confines were reciprocal forces that intensified each other. The emphasis with which coherent nation states and integrated territories were

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<sup>4</sup> See the six volumes of *A History of the World*, edited by Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel (2012–2018).



conjured up since the early nineteenth century can only be interpreted by taking into account existing definitions becoming liquid, people increasing in mobility, and flows of commodity diffusing more and more (Conrad 2010). Consequently, global historians like to talk about processes of re- or deterritorialization, about imagined communities, mental maps, and other categories that paraphrase spatial concepts as hypothetical constructs (Anderson 1983; Schenk 2002).

In this view, the building of nation states was an act of defense: One that could create unities and establish transitional political control before transnational processes soaked these voluntary definitions again and provoked further modification. Global history mirrors the complex interplay between national sovereignty, on the one hand, and the ambition to cooperate internationally, on the other. One of the main advantages of global history is that in applying to regions and nations a view from above, almost nothing appears to be 'natural' or self-evident. Rather, it were compromises, migrations, and mixtures that constituted global history (as a good example see Fischer-Tiné 2007).

Whereas international history in its traditional style explored obvious questions of power, global history finds them concealed in factual issues like technical questions, the setting of international standards, the competition among political, economic, technological, or cultural systems, and their scaling and synchronization, e.g., in air traffic or financial transactions (Murphy and Yates 2008; Wenzlhuemer 2010). Global historians are less inclined to research large political conferences at which the fate of peoples or nations were decided. Rather, they frequently turn towards congresses of scientists or experts at which decisions were made about topics such as the implementation of the metrical system, the technological adjustment of radio or telegraphy, the sustainable management of timber, or the coordinated exploitation of the Arctic regions.

Likewise, the League of Nations and the United Nations have become subjects of an intensified historical research (Mazower 2009; Yearwood 2009; Housden 2012). And indeed, in analyzing what they and their sub-organizations have achieved – often in the background – their records are much more impressive than if one only takes into account official politics and diplomacy where lofty expectations often were not fulfilled (see [www.lonsea.de](http://www.lonsea.de); Löhr 2010; Pedersen 2015).

There is also a rising historical interest in the phenomenon of large empires. Seen from a global perspective, empires have been longer-lasting and in many respects even more successful than nation states. Their existence is questioned not only for the centuries of hegemony and dominance that their military power allowed, but also as a successful model of integrating migrants and tolerating minorities (Darwin 2010; Leonhard and von Hirschhausen 2012). In some aspects, empires, with their rather flexible frontiers and their social stratifications, appear even more modern than nation states do.

In the 1990s, US political scientist Samuel Huntington predicted that the world would usher in a ‘clash of cultures.’ This sparked attention in its assertion that the global networks of traffic, communication, goods, people, and ideas do not automatically create a unified world, but also provoke defense actions that legitimize themselves culturally or religiously (Huntington 1996). There seemed to be a dialectic process of cross-border opening on the one hand, and on the other, a need for man to define distinctive spaces of law, culture, religion and morality. This dialectic is still valid and is one of the major problems of our time.

Today, more than ever before, global history has to deal with a problem that traditional world history was also faced with from its beginning: Who is allowed to research and write history? Who is capable of adequately surveying different world regions, provinces, and cultures? Such is a difficult task for a single person. Consequently, it has often been scholars working outside of the guild of historians – like Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, or William H. McNeill – who dared to do so. Nonetheless, there are some encouraging examples of global syntheses with respect to the nineteenth century coming from Christopher Bayly (2005) or Jürgen Osterhammel (2009). Other global histories resort to assembling a number of specialized authors to portray certain aspects of world history, and this also works well.

In earlier times, writing a coherent history of one nation seemed the most prestigious job that a historian could seek, while writing world history was regarded a field of mavericks, and writing local history was seen as an enterprise mostly for amateurs. Today, it seems as if historians should be ready to adapt to *all* regional and spatial levels. A ‘natural’ hierarchy of competence and of allegedly more and less important fields of historical research is about to dissolve (Geyer and Bright 1995; Manning 2003). In their everyday work, of course, historians have to focus and specialize on certain aspects; usually they are well educated to do so. But as everything is connected to everything in the end, a historian should be able to keep her or his eye on all these levels.

Today, more than ever, historians must stress the tentativeness of their findings and assertions. It was a distinguishing mark of former research that historians tended to assess their own national histories to be the most important in the world, to claim their own positions as being the most advanced, and also to rank their own virtues as the most significant (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). The perspective on world history that the writer presented was centralized and aligned to the writer’s position in society. Historians generally spoke of the world that was familiar to them at a given moment, and they tended to divide that world between leading civilizations on the one hand, and barbarians and antediluvians on the other. Following this path, meaningful histories of salvation were written,

which tended to legitimize one's own position while devaluing counter-positions (see Osterhammel 2002).

Today, regional histories or *area studies* are researched and written beyond such presumptions – or at least they should be (Schäbler 2007). One of the most salient and exciting aspects of global history is that it shows quite plainly how restricted our historical knowledge actually is, especially with respect to non-European affairs. The notion of Europeans to assess certain cultures of Latin America, Africa, or Asia as 'people without history' has been unmasked as a colonial attitude (Wolf 1982). Even more important is that it's not true. The more we know about other regions, the more we realize that Europe is just one of the world's provinces among others, the more Europe is 'provincialized' (Chakrabarty 2000).

To refer to two striking examples: what would have happened if, in 1485, Sultan Bayezid II had not prohibited the printing of books, a ban that remained in effect in the Ottoman Empire until the nineteenth century? How would world history have developed if, in the same century, the Chinese fleet had turned away from the African coast because Emperor Zeng-He's successors were too afraid of adventure expeditions? Chances and accidents are major forces of history, as are often-disregarded aspects like the weather or changes of climate. This has changed fundamentally (Grove 1997; Crosby 1986; Diamond 1997).

In recent book productions, there has been a revealing boom of histories telling exemplary stories of certain objects. Sometimes this is about crossroads, or supposed 'magic moments' of history (see Demandt 2004). Sometimes this is the story of things shaking the world like resources, inventions, or ideas, and their global impact, like the histories of spices, or tulip bulbs, or certain weapons like the notorious Kalaschnikow gun (see, for instance, Dash 1999). Alternatively, it is a story, sometimes referred to as *glocalization*, that describes or encompasses global changes as they are reflected in local settings (Epple 2007, 2013): For example, the protection of certain animals, like elephants, had far-reaching effects for the ivory industry in the Odenwald, a region located southwest of Frankfurt. This is another dialectic process, with the global and the local influencing each other. The ways in which global changes affect locals can most frequently be traced in the spheres of economy and industry (Giese, Mossig, and Schröder 2011). In this respect, telling the story of cocoa or cotton in a 'glocalized' way can be extremely illuminating (Beckert 2014).

There is yet another revealing approach that exemplifies global developments. *Biographies* enable historians to describe a multitude of activities and experiences, especially if the subjects in question traveled a lot and collected impressions about many places. A lot of them have lived 'transnational lives,' and the more closely we approach the present day, this kind of life, instead of being an exception, becomes a common phenomenon (Woollacott, Deacon, and

Russell 2010). This concept definitely applies to histories of human migration, irrespective of the motives that are responsible for the ‘restlessness’ of people moving (Bade 2003, Harzig and Hoerder 2009). There are many good reasons to stress ‘nomadic’ aspects of human life and to place them on an equal footing with ‘settled’ variations of human existence.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is no coincidence that the very person who wrote one of the first comprehensive records of European migration, Eugene M. Kulischer, also coined the phrase of ‘displaced persons’ (1948; see also Schlögel 2005).

History and cultural sciences should contribute to a better or more appropriate analysis of, and also a justification for, people being on the move and migrating. Today, everything is expected to circulate: goods, ideas, energies – why should *people* of all things stay home and nourish their ‘fixed identities’? It is certain that nothing as a ‘fixed identity’ exists.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the domesticating tendencies of modern nationalism, people more and more were ‘on the road’ and understood this as their prime mode of existence.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a ‘heuristic of flows and circulation’ should prevail over a heuristic of what is statically determinable. Today, *relations* are more relevant than causalities and comparisons, *movements* more relevant than conditions, *transitions* and *mixtures* more relevant than differences (Dommann 2016). I would add that this also applies to processes of synchronization, to perceived asynchronicities of simultaneous processes, and to (attempted) blockades of circulation as caused, for example, by terrorists. From current perspectives, this appears even more relevant than questions of war and peace.

## 2 Some Conclusions and Outlooks

To sum up some of the evidence here: Whereas in the 1980s, national histories were extended to many more agents and actors, since the 1990s, world history has been globalized, and also extended to allow even more actors to be involved. This can emphatically be assessed as a process of *democratizing* history. At the same time, it has also become much more difficult to identify distinctive tendencies of historical development, because the more factors one must regard, the more elaborate one’s conclusion must be. The times are gone when the course of world history could be attributed to a chosen few actors, such as statesmen or

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect is methodologically discussed by Monika Dommann 2016.

<sup>6</sup> For an archaeology of the concept, see Niethammer 2000; Assmann and Friese 1998.

<sup>7</sup> The fatal effects of nationalism are portrayed by Philipp Ther 2014, 2017.

inventors. And the times have also passed when the history of a globalized world could be viewed from a ‘Eurocentric’ perspective, unless one were to consciously and intentionally choose that as a central theme (Diogo and van Laak 2016).

Global history, however, carries the risk of almost everything it approaches appearing convertible and constructed. To counterbalance this notion, historical research should collaborate with other sciences to describe the more stable aspects of life, like the natural environment or anthropological constants, from the more diversified aspects – much as the French historian Fernand Braudel did in the 1940s in his classic study on the Mediterranean Sea (Braudel 1949). Research results from biology, meteorology, or medicine can provide fresh perspectives and insights for our historical understanding. This has already been exemplified by another version of recent historiography that is called *Big History*. It discusses relationships between natural and human history, and puts man-made history into a much longer developmental perspective (Spier 1996; Christian 2005). In doing so, certain findings are given a dramatic twist, such as the insight into how deeply man has interfered with the natural environment during the last two or three hundred years, creating a manipulated environment called the ‘Anthropocene’ (Möllers, Schwägerl, and Trischler 2014).

Historians have once been labeled as ‘prophets of the past’ (see Brenner 2010). But it seems more appropriate to view them as experts of collected and evaluated experiences. We cannot contribute to the future, but we definitely can help others to come to terms with the past. Given the explosion of complexity in a world being networked on a global scale, this certainly is no trivial task. We realize broadening gaps between those people obviously profiting from ‘globalization’ and people who reckon they just pay the bills. Cultural scientists and historians should do more on explaining the term ‘globalization’ and its complexities, and they also should discuss and historically better explain ‘diversity,’ ‘identity,’ ‘exile,’ ‘diaspora,’ or ‘home’ – categories that desperately deserve to become historicized.

The recent past has experienced an incredible extension of phenomena being subjected to cultural historians’ scrutiny: past emotions, space, time, animals, our built environment, pictures, sleep, the senses, and perceptions of all kind – for my part, I am quite determined that the next big thing will be a history of plants. This extension of phenomena has occurred because many traditions of restricting topics to certain disciplines have obviously eroded – and this is another liquidity being welcomed. What is needed, now, is a cultural history that is open and sensitive to different rhythms and paces of change – without preferring perceived ‘avant-gardes’ or depreciating purported ‘backwardnesses.’

Using examples from my own generation I have aspired to show how the horizons of recent historical research have expanded with respect to contents,

to space, and to methodology. Spaces have not been liquidated, but rather have been liquefied. The great privilege of historians remains that they can devote themselves to virtually *every* question, provided that it somehow addresses the *past*. Concerning the *future*, I am quite convinced that cultural and historical sciences that further promote globalization are about to enter into astonishing new spheres of knowledge.

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