

Conceptualizing Globalization
Contribution of Global History

CODESRIA 15th General Assembly

Dakar, December 2018

Before announcing the advent of “Globalization” it was “the end of the ideology” then “the end of history.” And before globalization studies there was World System Analysis! But at the beginning and at the center of all these descriptive and a prescriptive pseudo-concepts of the “global” and the “worldly”—and before it the “modern”— is the Western model that is being sold to the Rest !

Today, Globalization as “Western hegemony” --now a narrow US and Anglo-Saxon one-- is viewed as a form of “Western universalism” , i.e. the latest version of the ‘White Man’s Burden’, the East/South being considered as irrelevant to the making of Western and global modernity !

The globalization discourse of the Anglo-Saxon hegemon reiterates daily that while it graciously provides and pays for international public goods, “the Rest” is ungraciously free-riding on the hegemon’s largesse !

So, we have not finished dealing with racism, ethnocentrism and exclusion !

The critique of the Eurocentric a-historical ideology has taken a long time and went through several rounds .

- The first round was primarily the critique of Orientalism by Edward Said who focused on the cultural bias and the racism embedded in Eurocentric history.
- Other thinkers critiqued the Eurocentric biases in development (Samir Amine) and in historiography (Jack Goody and Eric Wolf).
- Subaltern studies made critical assessment of history which they revised from the view point of the global South.

- Then a further strand in the social and human sciences, Global History, which considers that contact and exchange among civilizations (not clash) is what drives human history forward, generated critical historical studies that recognized and documented the contribution of Asia and the Middle East, in particular, in the making of global economy and global history.

From Global History to “Oriental Globalization”

The discipline of Global History critiqued the embedded euro-centrism of the western social sciences; but it also overturned the conventional perspectives by developing the thesis of an “Oriental globalization” which preceded “Western globalization” and hegemony, thus implying a profound rethinking of world history, with all the repercussions this has on social sciences and development studies.

The anti-Eurocentric inclination of the Global History school was pioneered by a colleague of William McNeill's (author of *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*), Marshall Hodgson (three-volume *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*). It was then developed further through a line of World Historians and social scientists including:

*the Anthropologist Eric Wolf (most known for his *Europe and the People Without History* 1982),

*the sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod (*Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350. USA: Oxford University Press. 1991; Rabat, Urban Apartheid in Morocco*),

*the sociologist Nederveen Pieterse (I particularly like his 2012 “Periodizing globalization: Histories of globalization”),

*the Economic historian and sociologist Andre Gunder Frank, Barry K. Gills (Editors of *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*),

*the political scientist, international relations scholar John Montagu Hobson (*The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* 2004) and many more...

This school of World History set forth that “Europe”, “Asia” and “Africa” are not continents with separate and independent histories and civilizations. This separation is a pure fiction of Orientalists’ imagination (Holton, 1998, 31). Consequently, the edges/borders of these continents and civilizations are not ‘zones of conflict’ or ‘fault-lines’ but are, and should be viewed as, ‘zones of contact’ (Pratt, 1992) wherein civilizations come into mutually constitutive dialogue and exchange.

This is a gigantic shift away from the conception of the “international” and the “global” as “Western” provincialism, and a move towards a global-dialogic conception of inter- or trans-civilizational relations, that grant agency to both East and West, North and South, in global production and transformation.

The traditional Eurocentric linear narrative usually starts with 1492 with the expulsion of Muslims from Europe and opening of a new trade road –to India/America as a symbol of the “rise of the West”. It then progresses forward through a long line of European imperial, proto-global pioneers (Portugal, Netherlands, Britain...), culminating in globalization’s extreme form since 1945 under the *Pax Americana* !

World historians argue, on their part, that globalization and the global economy/ world system emerged well before 1492 . Janet Abu Lughod singles out the 13th century , others date globalization back to the Axial Age (8th to the 3rd century BCE)

In this vision of the *longue durée* the years 500-900 CE are considered as a watershed, because they ushered-in what World Historians identified as “*Oriental globalization*”. It was during this period, according to these scholars, that global relations became both **intensive** and **extensive** , and this was the result of two critical developments:

1. the emergence of a series of inter-linked Eastern ‘empires’ and
2. the development of the “Muslim world”

The critical regional 'empires' of Oriental Globalisation included the T'ang empire (618-907AD) in China, the Islamic Ummayyad/Abbasid empires in West Asia (661-1258AD), the Ummayyad polity in Al-Andalus/Spain (756-1031AD), and the Shi'a Fatimid dynasty in North Africa (909-1171AD), to which can be added the kingdom of Śrīvijaya in Sumatra which became a vital trade hub between 7th and 13th cent. connecting China to the Indian Ocean.

This Eastern world system was favored by the revival and expansion of camel transport between 300 and 500. African Trans-Saharan trade entered this world system at first thanks to the introduction of the Camel.

Between 500 and 900, after the development of a "Muslim world" this global trade system became centered in the Middle East, where Mecca constituted a global hub, linking the Indian Ocean trade with Asian continental trade (Islam/Mecca/Muhammad). By 875 Mecca was replaced by Baghdad as a hub of world trade with China and India (Hobson, 2004:40). The Middle East remained, would remain a "bridge" linking Asia, Africa and Europe throughout the 2nd millennium !

During this period, and up the 19th century, even the Silver and Gold Trade of the Americas served this Eastern World System. World trade during this period was organized around three major circuits:

- A western European-Mediterranean circuit, which profited from the crusades, but remained tangeantial to the system as a whole throughout this period, whence the preoccupation with finding an "alternative" road to the Indias!
- A Middle Eastern one which dominated both land trade in the central Asian steppes and Indian ocean trade thanks to its overland connections through the Red sea and the Arab-Persian Gulf

- A Far Eastern circuit of trade that connected the Indian sub-continent with South East Asia and China. A connection of this circuit to South American trade in silver and gold is just beginning to be unveiled by research

These three major circuits were, in their turn, organized in interlinked subsystems within which smaller trading circuits and subcultural and political systems existed

This Afro-Eurasian “world system” was woven together by major trade routes-- both transcontinental and trans-oceanic :

- the silk road was doubled by a another transcontinental road through the northern Asian steppes ,
- the Indian ocean route, afforded both long distance trade and exchanges between smaller geographical segments,
- the system was powered by African, Asian, Jewish, Indian, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian...merchants and financiers , who had in common a set of values, institutions, ideas and technologies which allowed their commerce to continue despite all its hardships.

Janet Abu Lughod presents a picture of the 13th century Asian pre-modern global order as "a long-standing, globally-integrated 'world-system,' to which Europe strove and succeeded in attaching itself-to only by the 14th century". She notes that

- “this world-system of the thirteenth century had three or four core areas” and states, that
- "within this system no single cultural, economic, or imperial system was hegemonic”, and that
- “a wide variety of cultural systems coexisted and cooperated, most of them organized very differently from the West."

Even after the Abbasid imperial system ended after the Mongol conquest of the mid-13th cent., trade relations were not interrupted nor was the “Oriental world

system” disintegrated. In fact, during this so-called “era of stagnation” of the Muslim world (according to Bernard Lewis and co.) the “Muslim world” doubled in size and by the middle of the 16th century, new Muslim imperial states were established in the Mediterranean, Iran, South Asia, Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. The power and grandeur of the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, Uzbek, and Songhai empires more than matched their contemporary dynastic states of Western Europe. In China the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) continued to play its central role in this world system.

Characteristics of “Oriental Globalization”

The distribution of global economic power within this system was **polycentric** , even if , in terms of extensive and intensive global power, the world of Islam dominated from 650 up to the Mongol invasion of Baghdad, and Ming and Sung China from the 13th to the 19th centuries. Indeed, alongside China, Islamic West Asia, North Africa as well as India and later Japan, maintained high levels of intensive and extensive global power down to 1800, with Europe remaining a small player in this vast Afro-Asian trading system (Frank, 1998; Hobson, 2004).

These inter-linked regions promoted an extensively **pacified** and **non-hegemonic** space that fostered considerable trade of a great variety of goods from a diversified cultural and ecological space.

This world system functioned thanks to what Hobson called “**an Eastern resource portfolio**” of **values, institutions, ideas, technologies, trade...** which profited all participants in this commerce and which was spread through (including the Europeans). Among the elements of this portfolio:

- banking techniques
- navigational/nautical techniques
- weapons deployed by the Iberians

- gunpowder, gun and cannon
- Muslim and Chinese ideas enabling Enlightenment
- Chinese agricultural/industrial technologies enabling British industrialization (Hobson, 2004, Ch. 9)

More than these technical and technological innovations pre-modern “Oriental Globalization” exhibited values that glued this system together. These included:

1. War was not the preferred means of conflict resolution. As an example I always cite the peace and trade treaty which the Umayyad Muslim Empire signed with the Chinese Tang empire in the 7th century after a limited and unique military confrontation between the two peoples. This treaty was never abandoned or discontinued by either party. Compare this behavior to the sum of intra-European, colonialist, neo-colonialist and imperial wars which marked Western history between the 15th and 20th centuries
2. Throughout Islamic West Asia Jews, Christians and Muslims lived peacefully side, as they had done in Spain down to 1492. And, throughout Eastern Asia, from Alexandria to Malaka, a wide variety of merchant and trading diasporas resided and traded peacefully together.
3. Until the armed intrusion of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean trade system at the end of the 15th century (1498) trading relation had been peaceful. With the exception of sporadic piracy, there was NO deployment of heavy weapons in Asian shipping (Curtin, 1984).
4. In dealing with Western aggressive intrusion into the world system China, which was the leading world power between 14th and 19th century, opted for an ‘international tribute system’, a voluntary system designed to entice ‘vassals’ towards China by giving them access to China’s economy (Hobson, 2004, 61-70, 305-12).

Compare this behavior and attitude to the Opium and other Western imperial wars!

In conclusion I would say that, if Global history, between the 7th and 19th centuries at least, seems to have been essentially Eastern/Oriental, it must not come as a surprise to see the possibility of its returning to the East, after a brief interlude of “Western globalization (19th-20th cent) as seen through the loupe of the longue durée.

Indeed, the “catching up” with the West of a number of countries, in Asia and Africa, and the transformation of the indicators of the global hierarchy of wealth in favor of the East/South, has encouraged the emergence of a “counter hegemonic discourse” in the West itself. Scholars and academics dare to speak today of the “Rise of the Rest” ! (“The Rest Beyond the West – Mapping a new world order” is the title of a new book to which our colleague Jomo Kwomo Sundaram has contributed)

It is a platitude to say today that US world hegemony is in crisis; our regretted colleague Samir Amine would have said that it is in “in its terminal crisis”. In any case it is clear that we have entered a long period of hegemonic breakdown and systemic chaos .

What we should strive for is a non-hegemonic world order which profits all parties, a global order where everybody wins and nobody loses. This requires that we develop a new definition of progress, a new approach to man’s relation with nature and a new approach to human interactions.

Revisiting and consulting world history and looking back at pre-modern “oriental globalization” affords an opportunity of enriching both our theoretical and empirical outlooks .