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Not Even Remotely Global? Method and Scale in World History

by *Antoinette Burton*

Geoff Eley's call for more rigorous histories of the global joins a burgeoning literature preoccupied with the relationship between contemporary planetary interdependence and what Hegel called *die Weltgeschichte* – which Ranajit Guha has translated as 'World-history'.¹ Seeking a break from the sociological literature on globalization as well as from the apparently endless terminological debate about when the word emerged or what it means, Eley offers a two-pronged approach, one which privileges two heretofore distinct historiographies: studies of slavery, post-emancipation and the Black Atlantic, and work on transnational labour markets and migration. By insisting on drawing each of these (back) into the history of global capital on either side of the long nineteenth century, Eley envisions histories of globalization that make the domain of the social – a longstanding concern of his – more legible than it has been among either self-styled world historians or students of geopolitics in a variety of disciplines.² He also aspires to rematerialize the political effects, in real and imaginary terms, of the convergence of historically specific forms of global transformation with, among other things, 'new patterns of transnational migration', both 'free' and coerced. Above all, Eley is interested in more rigorously historicized genealogies of the global present: genealogies that are, if not predictive, then at least forward-looking in terms of democratic practice for an emergent 'global left'.

There is much to get behind in response to a manifesto of this kind. In many respects, Eley's priorities are a breath of fresh air in the context of much recent work on globalization. For one thing, he challenges the econometric approaches on offer in the work of students of the phenomenon like Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton, for whom the exceptionalism of the present has been a central concern.³ Eley also takes seriously recent studies of transnational slavery and the racialized dimensions of global capital it instantiated at the heart of the pre and post-Enlightenment geopolitical order, in ways that have scarcely been recognized by the world-history establishment seeking grand narratives of civilizational power (save as a kind of ghettoized terrain of inquiry). Not least, he addresses the 'silence' at the heart of recent invocations of a common Europe around its 'actually existing diversity of contemporary populations', its 'borderlands' citizens, its Turkish/Muslim subjects. Although he doesn't make this connection, Eley's determination to expose what Jozsef Borocz calls 'the *topos* of west European moral superiority' links the question of Europe's

twentieth-century global positioning with what Borocz, again, calls ‘the never-colonial, yet always imperial, histories of various, clearly recognizable localities *within* Europe’ and – more provocatively – with the project of provincializing Europe itself.⁴

It’s this connection (or lack thereof) between Europe and the colonial/postcolonial in Eley’s essay that interests me most. He opens powerfully with a rationale for historicizing the global that is deeply rooted in a long narrative of anglo-american imperium, followed by a chilling assessment via Robert Cooper of the European Union as a ‘co-operative empire’ akin to Rome (utterly whitewashed of course: citizens, Cooper says, get ‘some of its laws, some coins and the occasional road’).⁵ But the pressure of histories of modern imperial ambitions or, alternatively, accounts of their role in shaping the very structural conditions that he sets at the heart of a new set of global histories are oddly absent, except allusively. When those allusions are limited to the usual suspects, they run the risk of occluding recent work on Soviet Russia and Japan – imperial histories that would add a more fully global dimension to Eley’s vision.⁶ I worry too that it is a presumptively Europe-centred global left that ends up being destination of Eley’s critique. He clearly recognizes the transnational, extra-European character of anti-capitalist, anti-globalization movements, though there is no sustained attention paid to work from those actors who operate outside the World Bank and NGO systems, save through references to Arundhati Roy (whose success in the progressive global marketplace is more predictable than remarkable, given the purchase of certain postcolonial subjects in that marketplace).⁷ Eley is quick to reject the arguments about deterritorialized sovereignty on offer in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* but he doesn’t pursue the implications of this for the kind of deracinated global radical movements (whether democratic or not) that are apparently quite sustainable even in a climate of ‘restructured’ national states. Indeed, the model for such states appears to be European rather than, say, South Asian or East Asian: a hint that for Eley as for so many others the view of globalization is in danger of being presumptively western – rooted in a post-1989 paradigm rather than a more comprehensively global one of fin-de-siècle neo-liberalization. Surely any history of twentieth-century globalization must account for the impact of empire and of postcoloniality as historical forces; surely these must be mobilized as analytical categories, alongside co-constitutive phenomena like slavery and post-emancipation labour regimes. This is especially true if we recognize that, in tandem, they contributed to the global restructuring of political forms across the whole of the twentieth century – and if, of course, we wish imperial history and postcolonial theory to serve as something other than ornamental in narratives of the contemporary global.⁸

Indeed it is striking that one of the most remarkably consistent features of dominant debate on globalization, whether academic or policy-oriented, is the almost complete lack of sustained attention to the ways in which what Partha Chatterjee has called the ‘rule of colonial difference’ has structured

geopolitics in its many and varied forms in post-Enlightenment history.⁹ With this term Chatterjee attempted to conjure the ideological and practical work that convictions about the distinctions between colonizer and colonized did in the context of British imperial rule, even and especially when administrators and officials expressed belief in the capacity of colonial subjects (eventually) to become imperial citizens. What's more, despite a compelling literature that addresses 'globalization from below', the view of globalization on offer is not just presumptively western, but presumptively imperial as well – even and perhaps especially when a critique of contemporary imperialism frames the conversation. By 'presumptively imperial' here I mean operating from the assumption that the west sets the terms of the debate, that global capital acts the way imperial capital is presumed to have done historically (from west to east), and that the international system as it was conceived in the wake of the Congress of Vienna (with its discrete nation states and sovereign powers) remains if not paradigmatic, then foundational in terms of 'our' understanding of modern world order. That this lens is most often also implicitly, if not arrogantly, Americo-centric reminds us of the durability of Cold War analytics on even the most progressive critiques currently available.¹⁰ The problem, then, is not only that 'the din of globalization' routinely drowns out the voices of those subject to globalization's 'geographical unevenness'. It's that the diagnostics and prognostics are broadcast in stereo – via mass and alternative media, in foreign policy and by way of a multiplicity of academic technologies – through historically specific analytical categories that remain attached to the models of nation-state internationalism and cosmopolitanism which arose in the nineteenth century and, far from disappearing, were reconsolidated in new forms in the postcolonial/Cold War era.¹¹ To shift from an aural to a visual metaphor, what we need are frameworks that effectively upend the 'inverted telescope' perspective that Euro-American and imperial histories in all their varieties have inherited and continue to reproduce from both vestigial and all-too-contemporary mechanisms of imperial power itself.¹² We need, as well, to express acknowledgement that even critical calls for genealogies of the global emanate often unself-consciously from imperial centres where the rule of colonial difference – as articulated in the belief, as one United States soldier's blog put it, that Iraqis before the occupation lived in 'a black hole' – still operates on the ground.¹³

Of related interest to me is the comparative lack of attention to the question of the local – whether metropolitan, regional, colonial, postcolonial or post-1989. In this sense, Eley may have thrown out the baby with the bathwater in setting aside much of the contemporary debate about globalization, where one response to the abstractions of global theorizing on the part of historians and others has been to counter with assertions of local specificity and contingency. Grounding the global in the local, it is often suggested, puts a brake on homogenizing generalizations and potentially at least gives a certain kind of agency to non-state actors and

marginal peoples, making them subjects rather than objects of the world-historical gaze. Eley's occlusion of this dimension is perhaps understandable – he's interested in big history, after all – but it also reveals the whiff of structural/material determinism that, despite his principled and critically engaged postmodern (post?)Marxist approach, still drives much of his argument and as significantly, his method. In this respect, he shares considerable ground with conventional world history (like Eley, and for the sake of convenience, I do not quibble over the distinctions between 'world' history and 'global' history), which focuses on economic development and most often, structural processes deemed large scale. Nor do I mean to suggest that the local is always already only the micro; to the contrary. The project of historicizing the global requires a self-conscious engagement with questions of method and scale. It necessitates a recognition, in other words, that what looks marginal or 'micro' from the perspective of Euro-American historiographies and locations may not be, and that the struggle against a euro/anglo-centric perspective on 'the world' – if this is even possible, given the modern colonial contexts in which what we recognize as the global and as history emerged – requires attention to translocal processes and identities as well as putatively global ones.

Let me be clear that by calling for sustained critical attention to the local I am not seeking simply to counterpose 'reality' to 'theory' or worse, to pit authentic, traditional, originary cultural phenomena against modern, constructed, cosmopolitan ones. Doing so would give the global more power than it actually has as an explanatory category and would also run the risk of imagining that locals and globals are not mutually (if unevenly) constitutive depending on the specific historical circumstances which allow them to come into view as such. Indeed, 'local' and 'global' have no purchase outside histories of power and domination, whether modern or not, whether imperial or not – that is, they have no meaning outside of what South Asian literary critic Kumkum Sangari calls 'the pressure ... of historical placement'.¹⁴ Rather, I want to insist that the 'problem' entailed by world history is one primarily of method and scale rather than of local/global as such. By explicitly confronting presumptions about scale – a tool of historical geographers and, to a lesser degree, recent scholars of space and place – it's possible to draw attention to the metrics by which historical subjects enter the domain of 'the world' as well as from what locative positions such space is measured and consolidated as the global or as its putative and typically supine opposite, the local.

When conceived along these lines, global history has the capacity to register two intentions that are not at odds with Eley's ambitions for it but that involve a more self-consciously perspectival methodological approach than what he offers. First, histories of the global as I imagine them register a determination to make visible the apparently micro processes by which historical events with 'global' significance have taken place – to materialize a kind of 'structural below', in other words, and with it, actors and subjects

often considered inconsequential even when they are legible in world histories. This vision for global history signals, secondly, a commitment to enlarging the scope or scale of the terrain recognized as ‘the world’ by bringing to readers’ sightlines a variety of geographical locations outside the conventional west where world-historical events with wide-ranging impact have happened without registering on the map of ‘world’ history – to excavate a kind of ‘geographical below’, primarily through attending to histories produced in and by the global south. Such an approach is exemplified by work like Donald Wright’s *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa* (2004), which tacks the story of commodities and people in and from Niimi to the fortunes of world history from 1500 onward. Wright does so not only to provide an account of the underside of global history nor to ratify dependency theory or even necessarily to restore the much sought-after agency of ‘native’ subjects in the global capitalist system – though he does all these things – but more precisely, and most significantly, to illustrate the historical actuality of what another Africanist calls ‘village modernity’.¹⁵

The feminist philosopher Sarah Ahmed, writing in a different but related vein, might call this a critique of ‘the force of the vertical’ which, with its embedded hierarchies of scale and value, undergirds modernist historical narrative, whether in the west or from outside it.¹⁶ In this sense, and at their critical best, histories of the global can and should act as ‘reorientation devices’, reminding us of the inheritance of empires past, present and future which presses down on them as well as their radical potential for directing our analytical presumptions and our methodological energies in different directions at once – and for enabling us to see not just the world and its historic fulcra, but the off-centre, the ex-centric, the polycentric, the anti-centric and the ‘remotely global’ as well.¹⁷

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History*, Columbia, 2002, p. 2.

2 Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*, Michigan, 2005.

3 See for example *The Global Transformations Reader*, ed. David Held and Anthony McGrew, Cambridge, 2000, and Held, McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathon Perraton, *Global Transformations*, Stanford, 1999.

4 Jozsef Borocz, ‘Goodness is Elsewhere: the Rule of European Difference’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48: 1, 2006, p. 112 and p. 134; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton, 2000. Though space does not permit more than this reflection, it’s interesting that the debate about Europe and postcolonialism may yet find its most fertile ground in discussions about globalization and global history.

5 Robert Cooper, 'The New Liberal Imperialism', at <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,680093,00html>, cited Eley, 'Historicizing the Global', notes 3, 4.

6 I am thinking here specifically of Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Cornell, 2005, and Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*, New York, 2004.

7 For discussions of (third) world literature and the cult of celebrity see Bhishnupriya Ghosh, *When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel*, Rutgers, 2004; Timothy Brennan, 'Cosmopolitans and Celebrities', *Race and Class* 31, July-Sept. 1989, pp. 1-19; and Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London, 2001.

8 For a compelling history of one aspect of this see Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: the Global Restructuring of an Empire*, Durham, NC, 2006.

9 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Princeton, 1993.

10 For one critique of this blind spot see Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*, Durham, NC, 2005.

11 See for example Antoinette Burton, Augusto Espiritu and Fanon Che Wilkins, 'Introduction: the Fate of Nationalisms in the Age of Bandung', *Radical History Review* 95, 2006, pp. 145-8.

12 *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Jonathan Culler, London, 2005, p. 13.

13 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, New York, 2005, p. 60.

14 Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, ed. T. Niranjana, P. Sudhir and V. Dhareshwar, Calcutta, 1993, p. 264.

15 Donald Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: a History of Globalization in Niimi, the Gambia*, 2nd edn, New York, 2004; Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*, Chicago, 1999.

16 Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, NC, 2006, p. 159.

17 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 3, and Piot, *Remotely Global*. See also James Ferguson, 'Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy After Development', in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty, Durham, NC, 2005, pp. 166-81.