

Historein

Vol 13 (2013)

Questions and Orientations in History during the last 20 years. Part 2



Introduction: Questions and Orientations in History During the Last 20 Years

Editorial Committee

doi: [10.12681/historein.235](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.235)

To cite this article:

Committee, E. (2013). Introduction: Questions and Orientations in History During the Last 20 Years. *Historein*, 13, 5–7. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.235>

Questions and Orientations in History During the Last 20 Years

The current issue of *Historia*, which forms the second part of the theme “Questions and Orientations in History During the Last Twenty Years”, explores further the interrelations between changes in various areas of social, economic and cultural life and the writing of history. Perspectives such as the “imperial” and “spatial turn”, fields such as global history, and analytical categories such as “empire”, theorised “as a context-setting category”, contest the national rule of writing history. At the same time, and it is quite remarkable, in much historiographical work these turns point to a moral imperative against the exclusionist practices of present-day xenophobic, nationalist or racist tendencies that have entrenched themselves in societies in the twenty-first century. The new global/imperial history derives from a decentred narrative which does not recognise one driving force but long-term interaction, opting for a methodology that is based on difference and polymorphy, comparison and transnational perspectives. The perspectives examined in this issue reflect the anxieties and disappointments about the growing economic and social inequalities in recent decades on a global scale and the demise of welfare states; they inquire into the failure of revolutionary movements and politics; they develop concepts that highlight the fragility of the limits between the self and the other. These concerns and questions shape the perspectives, methodologies and analytical tools that have been developed in the last 20 years in order to deal with global processes. The preoccupation with the future of the historical past points to a political stance that is deeply concerned with the language in which historical dynamics are constructed.

Introduction

As an emergent historiographical field, global history has gained ground in its attempt to reorder historical knowledge with new questions, approaches and methodologies. It has used a global and transnational approach to issues of gender, migration, class, revolution and empire, but also to the history of commodities and intellectual history. Being critical of the older Eurocentric historiography that used concepts such as “progress”, “capital” and the “state” and placed northwestern Europe at the centre of the globalising economy, global history revolves around the question of economic divergence, privileges the concept of “empire”, and compares empires within a global framework aiming at a polycentric history. Using methodological tools such as “connections”, “encounters”, “contacts”, as well as expanding Marc Bloch’s notion of “comparison”, it has driven historical enterprise away from notions of European supremacy towards economic, sociopolitical, technological and cultural exchanges but also towards exploitation, slavery and war. Sakis Gekas’

article addresses also the issue of the capabilities and readiness of global history to offer a narrative of economic crises and global politics.

In conjunction with comparative, transnational and global approaches, the problematic of empire became the dominant historiographical paradigm in Russian studies in the 1990s. The “imperial turn” constituted a “flourishing interdisciplinary subdiscipline” which placed Russian history within a global perspective. Focusing on two journals, *Kritika* and *Ab Imperio*, Ada DiIalla examines in depth the historiographical debates that shaped the field of Russian studies in the last 20 years. These journals address comparative, transnational, crosscultural, local and regional histories (*Kritika*) and point to a redirection of the perspective to encompass the periphery as well as the subaltern (*Ab Imperio*). Empire is theorised as a “context-setting category” that allows the study of complex identities and societies in which contradictory roles cannot be explained by linear or clear-cut categorisations or essentialist ethnonational paradigms. The challenge to comparative history emerges from an interrogation of the comparative method as solidifying the boundaries of the objects of comparison and a shift in the understanding of comparison from comparing structures to comparing effects.

The historiographical engagement of the “imperial turn” with comparisons affected the encounter of Ottoman studies with postcolonial studies. The survey of this literature by Vangelis Kechriotis introduces the reader to the debates among historians on the issue of the comparison of the Ottoman with other empires. One may observe an eruption of terms denoting different historiographical agendas, ranging from the dismissal of any comparison of the Ottoman with other empires to the embracing of a systematic comparison with other empires, in particular the British and French.

A large body of literature has developed around the change of terminology from “revolutions” to “civil wars” and the collateral results for the exploration of social movements in history and the political and social sciences. Revolutions became a fruitful ground for historians to construct comparative explanatory models. The study of revolutionary movements and politics has been a flourishing field, especially since the 1960s. Polymeris Voglis describes the shift in the study of revolutions in the 1990s, a landmark of which was the inextricability of revolution and violence and its identification with civil war. The main objective of these studies is to downplay the political, ideological and cultural characteristics of revolutionary movements and reduce them to mere strategies of domination and tactics of warfare. Rational choice theory assumes a dominant approach in these studies, which are characterised by a utilitarian idea of the self whose decisions are motivated by personal benefit. Ironically enough, this rational individual is stripped of his individuality as his actions are determined by a ruling minority. One can observe a delegitimation of revolution in academia as its analysis became restricted to the study of the violence of revolutionary agents. Yet, radical culturalist approaches also emerged which placed particular emphasis on the role of myth, memory and mimesis, which shaped people’s consciousness and culture in their struggle against power.

In a similar vein to revolutions, as Kostis Kornetis’ article shows, the “structuralist” approach, in its version as a “resource mobilisation” perspective, became the dominant theoretical frame of analysis for social movements, such as 1968, and was followed in the 1990s by a “culturalist”

approach. The focus on culture, biography, identity, emotions and affect – activists' subjectivity – was an important shift in approaching social movements, despite the indifference of the culturalist approach to the consequences of the movements on the political system and culture. The first decade of the 2000s was marked by the transnationalisation of social movements, moving away from specific national case studies and privileging cultural transfers, networks and communication between movements. Another trend dealt with the effects of social movements, such as those of 1968, 1989 and 2001, in bringing about political change and shaping both political practices and ideas but also individual subjectivities. An interesting discussion on the various interpretations of the 1989 revolution shows their dependence on previous analytical frameworks. Examining the 2011 movements, Kornetis argues that the paradigm of the new social movements has not created any fissures in our understanding of social action and that the sociology of contentious politics seems to be trapped in the 1968 moment, amid stagnation in the theories on social movements. The issues tackled by this article are at the centre of present-day discussions on social movements. Bearing this in mind, a few questions arise: Does the insistence on a framework of comparison of new social movements with 1968 reinforce a Eurocentric approach and conflate different movements such as the Arab spring, Spain's Indignados and the Occupy movement? Does taking into account the new flourishing sociology of social movements, which has introduced a new paradigm of analysis of the global movements against capitalism, pave the way for a rethinking of old and new social movements?

Structuralism as a dominant theoretical choice in the historical and social sciences is dealt with in the majority of articles of this volume, albeit concerning different fields and objects of research. Haris Exertzoglou's article offers a critical approach to social history and especially its meeting with the cultural turn. The article starts with an overview of the history of social history, which stresses structure and structuration as providing the shape that would make social history the dominant model of historical analysis in its vision and effort to study and integrate all social experience into a totality. As he argues, "structure and structuration provided the intellectual and methodological means for adequate answers to complex questions explaining composite phenomena in the long run". The shift to the cultural has been discussed within the broader framework of economic, epistemological and political change. Some historians have connected the shift from social to cultural history with major changes, from Fordist capitalism to a new regime of "flexibility" (Sewell), while others have linked it to a displaced response to the Holocaust and disillusionment with Enlightenment principles (Spiegel).

Cultural history represents a new configuration between politics and history as well as a post-essentialist problematisation of the social causality dominant in social history. Historians who are critical of poststructuralism tend to conflate the cultural turn with identity politics. This conflation has not served the critical discussion on identity as it has been made on the grounds that "culturalism" and "particularisms" put forward different truth claims that deny any possibility of coherent narrativisation and curtail an alternative future. Furthermore, it ignores a critique of identity politics that sees identities as relational and difference as that which makes identity possible. Any attempt to rethink social history has to take into account the impact of the cultural on the practice of history, namely to consider the discursive and the symbolic and to rethink notions of "reality" and "truth" in terms of plurality and difference.