

“The New Global History”

by Bruce Mazlish

As all historians know, there is nothing completely new under the sun. In writing about global history, or rather the new global history, I am aware that I am following a path on which others have taken steps, sometimes giant steps. Let me touch on a few of my predecessors.

I start my tale with Adam Smith. As we all know, Smith revolutionized economic thinking by emphasizing the division of labor and its promise of almost endlessly increasing production. Its only limit, as he announced in Chapter 3 of The Wealth of Nations, was the extent of the market.

Building on Smith’s perception, Karl Marx, in the “Communist Manifesto,” described how “Modern industry has established the world-market, for which the discovery of America paved the way.” His following analysis is uncanny in its anticipation of what is occurring today in the process of globalization. Modern industry for Marx, of course, is directed by the bourgeoisie. In sonorous phrase after phrase, Marx hymns the accomplishments of that class in expanding the market. “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.” And one more quote: “The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production”—thus adding technology to Smith’s division of labor—“by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation.”

One forgets too often that Engels was the co-author of the “Manifesto”; he has always been in Marx’s shadow. However, in preparation for the great document of 1848, Engels had written a year earlier, in his “Principles of Communism”, that “A new machine invented in England deprives millions of Chinese workers of their livelihood within a year’s time. In this way, big industry has brought all the people of the earth into contact with each other, has merged all local markets into one world market, has spread civilization and progress everywhere and has thus ensured that whatever happens in civilized countries will have repercussions in all other countries.”¹

One more of the oracular voices must be heard. It is Max Weber’s, as when he introduces his Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism by announcing that “in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value.” Weber then briefly discusses some of these phenomena, including science, and concludes that “the most fateful force in our modern life” is capitalism. Marx had spoken of the capitalist’s “werewolf appetite” for profit. In more somber tones, Weber wrote that “capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever renewed profit,” but then explains its dynamism in less animal-like terms, stressing its multi-causal nature, and especially emphasizing its rational aspect.

¹ Karl Marx Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 6, 1845-1848 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 345.

It is astonishing how portentous the words of Smith, Marx, Engels, and Weber have turned out to be. They seem to have recognized some of the forces of globalization—science, technology, capitalism—in their early manifestations and sensed their future implications. Even lesser men caught what was in the air, where solid structures were melting. Thus, in the debate over the Napoleonic Code of Commerce, in 1803, a proponent of one clause in the Code exclaimed, “The bill of commerce has been invented. In the history of commerce this is an event almost comparable to the discovery of the compass and of America....[I]t has set free movable capital, has facilitated its movements, and has created an immense volume of credit. From that moment on, there has been no limits to the expansion of commerce other than those of the globe itself.”²

Yet, it is one thing to acknowledge premonitions about globalization, and another to recognize that what is going on around us today transcends these earlier conceptualizations of the phenomenon, though building on them.³ Before turning to my own effort to deal with the subject, one last quotation on the particularly economic nature of globalization. It comes from Manuel Castells’s The Rise of the Network Society. There he announces that “The informational economy is global. A global economy is a historically new reality, distinct from a world economy. A world economy, that is an economy in which capital accumulation proceeds throughout the world, has existed in the West at least since the sixteenth century, as Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein have taught us. A global economy is something different: it is an economy with the capacity to work as a unit in real time on a planetary scale.”⁴

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Up to now I have been standing on the shoulders of tall figures, if not giants. It is time for me to get down and start trudging on the path they have laid out. In doing so, I am practicing a form of contemporary history, a form generally held in disregard by most historians (who, of course, thereby ignore Herodotus, the founder of our inquiry). A word in defense of my practice. Whether consciously we admit it or not, our writing of history is, overtly or covertly, in part an attempt to situate ourselves correctly in regard to current problems. Thus it is in regard to our effort to understand globalization today. While employing a multi-disciplinary approach, we must comprehend that process in a wide-ranging historical perspective. In doing so, we help create what will become our own past, is now our present, and is unfolding before us as our future.

A preliminary word is in order about the relation of World History to what I am calling the New Global History. World history, as a form of inquiry, has had its own trajectory and vicissitudes. As I view it, it took its rise mainly from post World War II and a recognition that the eurocentric perspective was no longer viable. While there were

² Albert O. Hirschman, The Passions and the Interests (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 74, fn. b.

³ An early work leading up to the promised land of global history is G. Barraclough, An Introduction to Contemporary History (London: C.A. Watts & Co., 1964). In their article, “World History in a Global Age,” (The American Historical Review, Vol. 100, No. 4, October 1995, 1034-1060), which also offers valuable bibliography, Michael Geyer and Charles Bright come close to crossing the boundary between world history, traditionally conceived, and what I am calling New Global History. Their ambivalence is reflected in their title. See, also, William H. McNeill, “The Changing Shape of World History,” History and Theory. Theme Issue 34 “World Historians and Their Critics,” 14.

⁴ Manuel Castells, The Rise of the Network Society, Vol. I. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 92.

predecessors in the form of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, world history as a legitimate form of research and a recognized part of the curriculum took on professional shape at the hands of William McNeill and many others. It has achieved a reasonable amount of institutionalization, though not as much as its proponents would like, and would appear to have an assured future before it.

I will argue here that World History (though it sometimes also calls itself Global History) is not what I am calling by the name New Global History. I will attempt to make clear why this is so by an affirmative approach: explaining what I think the New Global History to be, and thus mainly by implication the way in which world history is different. For one thing, of course, globalization is a process now going on around us, while world history stretches in all directions. One speaks of globalization; one hardly speaks of “worldlization” as a movement operating today.

Thus, while retaining some of the achievements and aspiration embodied in World History as it is practiced by many, I would like to suggest that our “imaginings” must leap from world history to new global history.⁵ In making this jump, a look at the etymology of the words, *world* and *globe*, is helpful. Words are not just what individuals say they mean; they have a historical nature. *World* comes from the Middle English for “human existence”; its central reference is to the earth, including everything and everyone on it. Worlds can also be imaginary, such as the “next world,” meaning life after death, for instance. For many, the discovery of the New World marked the advent of world history. More recently, a first, a second, and a third world have been discerned, demarcating different levels of development.

Such usage ill accords with the term *global* (one cannot substitute New Globe for New World in 1492, or third globe for third world today). It occupies a different valence, deriving from the Latin, *globus*, the first definition of which is “something spherical or rounded,” like a “heavenly body.” Only secondarily does the dictionary offer the synonym, *earth*. *Global* thus points in the direction of space; its sense permits the notion of standing outside our planet and seeing “Spaceship Earth.” (Incidentally, earth is a misnomer for our planet; as is evident from outer space, our abode is more water than earth.) This new perspective is one of the keys to new global history, where, indeed, a new space/time orientation is observable.⁶

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The fact is that we are entering upon a global epoch.⁷ That is the revolutionary development of our present time. Unlike other revolutionary efforts at global reach, such

⁵ I have attempted to deal directly with World/Global History more or less in its own terms in my review-essay, “Big Questions? Big History?”, where I examine Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*, and Fred Spier, *The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang Until Today*, in *History and Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1999, 1-17.

⁶ For a further development of the difference between world and global see my article, “Comparing Global History to World History,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXVIII: 3 (Winter 1998), 385-395. Also, my article, “Crossing Boundaries: Ecumenical, World, and Global History,” in *World History. Ideologies, Structures and Identities*, ed. Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, Richard T. Vann (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 41-52. The rest of the volume itself, otherwise devoted to World History, is worth consulting.

⁷ One of the earliest statements of this fact is Wolf Schafer’s “Das 20. Jahrhundert hat gerade erst begonnen: Nach welchen Kriterien kann die Gegenwartsgeschichte periodisiert, kann eine Epoche konstruiert werden?” *Die Zeit*, 25 October 1996, 56. Even earlier, in 1993, in my Introduction to *Conceptualizing Global History*, ed. Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens (Boulder: Westview Press), I had

as the Communist, the forces of globalization do not have to take on political form. Rather than seizing state power, they are, in fact, often undermining existing state powers. While states do remain major actors in the global epoch, power is shifting increasingly to amorphous forces, such as environmental, or to communications networks, or to new, less fixed sorts of institutions, such as multi-nationals and NGOs.

This is the major transformation through which we are now living. To signal its importance, we do not need to adopt an apocalyptic tone, nor assume that it will be a linear and completely deterministic development. The "event" itself, occurring as we enter a new millennium, speaks everywhere for itself. What we do need, however, is to raise our awareness—our consciousness—to the level of our situation.

In order to help achieve that sense of new global history and a greater consciousness of our present situation, I shall try to describe and analyze some of the major features of the emerging global epoch. In this aspiration, we are taking up anew the burden of the classical sociologists, only now on a more extended plane. The classical problem in social theory had been to explain the transition to "modern" society. Marx, preceded by Adam Smith and Hegel, sought both to describe and to analyze the tremendous transformation from "feudal" to "modern", the shift from a society based on personal relations to one largely based on impersonal market forces. Where Marx focused on the economic relations of production, his later compatriot Max Weber emphasized the new rationality. Others stressed cultural factors, and still others highlighted the role of science and political power.

Now the transition to be described and analyzed is not to industrial society as such, but to the globalized society in which increasingly all peoples live. Indeed, the very term "epoch" marks from the first a global perspective. It came into general usage in the early nineteenth century in the field of geology, where the new science was seen as addressing the entire earth. Geological processes were viewed as world wide. As William Buckland, one of the pioneers in the new field, remarked, "The field of the Geologist's inquiry is the Globe itself."⁸ One spoke, for example, of the Eocene Epoch, marking a new and important period in the earth's development (or, as the change in regard to the earth's flora and fauna would be called after Darwin, evolution). Such an epoch was necessarily global in its dimensions.

Periodization of any kind is central to the human effort to organize time (whether human or geological). We impose boundaries on the otherwise chaotic happenings of the past, seeking to order them by restrictive names. Decades, eras, centuries--these are alternate divisions to that of epochs. Of course, such orderings can, on occasion, mislead rather than guide us through the chaos of events. So, too, can the larger periodizations of Western history: the famous ancient, medieval, modern divisions. We may take for real what is only an illusory reification of time.

This is the test that the phrase "global epoch" will have to undergo. Readers will have to judge its validity on the basis of what follows. On the assumption that the phrase holds up meaningfully, it offers us an escape from the current rather clamorous modern-postmodern debate. With the notion of global epoch, I am suggesting that we have an

used the term, but my colleague Wolf Schafer's article spells out in much greater detail the case for the suggested new periodization.

⁸ Quoted in Charles Coulston Gillespie, *Genesis and Geology* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1951), 104.

alternative way of revising, or renewing, our sense of history. In short, the most useful, i.e., illuminating, successor to modern history as a periodizing rubric may be new global history.

Some years ago, E.H. Carr wrote an influential book called What is History?⁹ Drawing inspiration from his effort, we may now ask "What is New Global History?" The provisional answer comes in two parts. The first is that New Global History focuses on the history of globalization; that is, it takes existing developments encapsulated in what I shall call the factors of globalization, and then studies them as far back in the past as seems useful. What these factors are will be spelled out shortly.

The second part of the definition stresses that New Global History is simply about processes that are best studied on a global rather than a local, national, or regional level. In this mode, New Global History can be seen as a continuation of what is called World History, or at least one branch thereof, where such global processes as plague or pollution may be studied, manifesting themselves as they do across established institutional boundaries.

The two parts of New Global History, of course, can and do overlap; we are dealing with a question of emphasis. In my view, however, it is the history of globalization that lies at the heart of the notion of a new emerging global epoch. It is what is truly new--global processes as such have existed for eons--and it is what is shaping our social existence into a novel form whose future shape is only dimly perceived.

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A brief preliminary glance at what I am calling the factors of globalization will advance our understanding. The starting point for New Global History lies in some of the following innovations: a thrust into space, imposing upon us an increasing sense of inhabiting a concrete global entity--"Spaceship Earth"--which can be viewed from outside the earth's atmosphere; satellites in outer space that link the peoples of the earth in an unprecedented fashion; nuclear threats, whether in the form of either weapons or utility plants, which demonstrate that the territorial state can no longer adequately protect its citizens from either military or ecologically related "invasions" (e.g., Chernobyl); other environmental problems, such as ozone holes and global warming, that refuse to conform to lines drawn on a map; and multinational corporations that increasingly dominate our economic and cultural lives.

Numerous other such factors could be added: global consumerism (obviously related to multinationals); the displacement of an international political system by a global one; the globalization of culture, especially music (fostered as it is by satellite communications); the increasing spread of human rights as a global standard of behavior; and so forth.

All of these factors and more compose the research agenda for new global historians. Though enough has been undertaken to show how the search might continue, as of now only tentative particular results are at hand. The fact is that, even before the empirical inquiries, it was critically important to define the field, or sub-field, and its special perspective.¹⁰

⁹ E. H. Carr, What is History? (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

¹⁰ The first effort to undertake this task took place at a conference in Bellagio, Italy, in 1991. One result was the publication of a volume, previously cited, Conceptualizing Global History, ed. Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1993). See, especially, the chapters by Wolf Schafer,

What is essential to bear in mind from the very beginning is the synergy and synchronicity of the various factors. It is their interaction with one another, in ever increasing extent and force, that is truly new, for each of the factors, singularly, has its origins in a differentiated past. Globalization is the sum and synergy of their continued presences. The result is a reality that now affects every part of the globe and every person on it, even though in widely differing local contexts. In fact, one could extend the definition of New Global History by saying that much of it has necessarily to devote itself to studying the factors of globalization in relation to a "local" reality, which can take many forms. Thus, globalization, a process, takes on concrete historical features, rather than floating as a vague abstraction high above actual, even everyday life.

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The historical, of course, is simply one way of looking at phenomena. It does have the potential, however, of offering the longer view, and of thus providing a depth of understanding to its object of study otherwise unavailable. Thus, globalization can be looked at primarily as an economic development, e.g., as a stage of late capitalism. It can be viewed as a mainly political development, where the nation-state is seen as the prime actor losing vital functions. Or the focus can be on the cultural changes, with a presumed homogenization occurring among peoples.

History's conceptual weakness is that it must deal with all the aspects of a phenomenon--e.g., economic, political, cultural--and the ways they interrelate, yet without an overall, satisfactory theory as to how that interrelation takes place. Yet, its weakness is also its strength, for it is the only one of the human sciences that at least attempts to understand the full, complex reality of human behavior over time, even if under-theorized. To compensate, it must draw heavily on the other human sciences, and their theories and approaches. Consequently, in regard to the study of globalization, it is obvious that New Global History must be highly interdisciplinary.

History, i.e., historiography, is itself subject to the forces of globalization. For most of human "history", i.e., the 99% of the species' past as hunter-gatherers, history, the conscious attempt to know the past "scientifically", did not exist. It is a late development in human evolution. Whether one chooses to start this development with the ancient civilizations of China or India, or wishes to argue for its true beginnings with the Greeks a few thousand years ago, it is clearly of comparatively recent vintage.

Starting perhaps in the seventeenth century, a Western mode of "scientific" history achieved prominence and power. It also achieved hegemony, imposing its eurocentric version on other peoples. As E.H. Carr innocently expressed the initial stage of this happening, "It is only today that it has become possible for the first time even to imagine a whole world consisting of peoples who have in the fullest sense entered into history and become the concern, no longer of the colonial administrator or the anthropologist, but of the historian."¹¹ Chinese scholars now look at their past with the same scholarly methodology as found in the West; Indian scholars do the same. In the process, of course, they are changing the Eurocentric myopia, and enlarging all humanity's historical perspective. A new global history, therefore, is possible, though

Manfred Kossok, and my introduction to that volume. Subsequent conferences and volumes, published by Westview Press, have followed. Among the volumes should be noted Global History and Migrations, ed. Wang Gungwu (1997), and Food in Global History, ed. Raymond Grew (1999).

¹¹ E. H. Carr, What is History?, 199.

indubitably starting from certain Western preconceptions of how one conducts such a study.

In short, the history in New Global History is itself necessarily undergoing globalization. In so doing, it becomes a subject to be studied just as are other parts of the phenomena. The very perspective then, the historical, that is used to study globalization, is not a static one, but subject to shifting forces and fates. Hence, the lens by which we look at the globalization process becomes itself part of that very process. How exactly this re-grinding will occur, only time--and the practice of new global history--will tell.

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In further seeking to understand globalization, especially from an historical perspective, we run into a number of problem areas. A major one concerns the actors to be studied. For the last few hundred years, the writing of history has circled around the activities of the nation-state, its wars, its economic activities, its nationalistic culture, and its political leaders. Profound shifts are underway in this regard. Though, as I have argued, the nation-state will still be a major player in new global history, its role must be reassessed in terms of the larger process unrolling around it.

At the same time, other players than the nation-state crowd the stage of history. Especially prominent are NGOs and multinational corporations, both of whose increase in numbers recently has been phenomenal. In a fuller treatment, we would wish to consider their emergence in relation to the notion of civil society, for certainly they have grown in the soil first laid down in the Enlightenment cultivation of the public sphere and public opinion. Forsaking such a digression, I will focus first on two prominent forms of NGOs, those related to human rights and to the environment.

Human rights is a global assertion, rising above the national rights restricted to citizens by earlier democratic movements. Today, although this view is hotly contested in some quarters, one has rights not because one is a German, Frenchman, or an American, but because one is a human being. As we all know, however, there are few if any institutionalized "global" courts to enforce these rights (though they are enshrined in the UN Declaration). It is the court of public opinion that mainly gives whatever strength there is to their observation. And that public opinion is shaped and given voice by NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other such organizations. In other words, in our informational/computer age, human rights proponents, in the guise of NGOs, are the conscience of the globe.

Another proliferating form of NGO relates to the environment. In this area, private, not-for-profit groups mobilize on both a local and a global basis to deal with threats to ecology. It is these groups that prod national governments to take international actions. Using the new informational technology, NGOs such as the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and innumerable others mobilize forces around the world to combat what are clearly global as well as local crises.

Increasingly, then, it is these NGOs, along with multinational corporations and an adapting nation-state, that are the actors to be studied by the historian or other social scientist. Alongside of these forces, of course, must be placed the UN. A cross between a forum for nations with their pursuit of national aims by international means, and an institution seeking to transcend its members and their parochial concerns, the UN still is unsure of its mission. That mission, it dimly senses, is a global one, but how to move to fulfill it is clouded in ambiguity and dissent. Justice and Force would seem to be the two

key terms in this regard: how to adjudicate local power squabbles in global terms, which must include prevention, and how to enforce UN judgments militarily are the clear challenges. For the student of globalization, the evolution of UN military forces deserves all the attention he or she can give it.

Turning now to multinationals, as our other selected actor, they have been traced back two thousand years by classical scholars.¹² This is accurate, in the sense that certain trading groups were transnational. It is anachronistic in that nation-states did not exist at the time, thus giving a different meaning to multinational. If we add the word "corporation", we again must realize that that is a legal term given precise meaning only recently. In any case, modern multinational corporations can be discerned emerging in the seventeenth century and flourishing, for example, in the shape of the Dutch and British East India companies.

Eschewing a continuous history, let me jump to our global present. Today, according to the UN, of the 100 largest possessors of GDP, 52 are multinationals. Which means that they are wealthier on that index than about 120-130 nation-state members of the UN. Another figure: today there are said to be over 60,000 multinationals, a dramatic increase over the numbers existing only a few years previously. And yet another figure: in the past quarter of a century, the list of the top 500 industrial multinationals has shifted from almost entirely American/European to almost two fifths Japanese/Asian.

How are we to understand what is happening? As a preliminary, we necessarily must define what we mean by a multinational corporation. Then we must describe and analyze the features that we think characterize it: where is it headquartered? where is its workforce? where are its sales? where go its capital flows? etc.? Then we must look at these features dynamically, seeing them develop over time. Then we must compare companies with companies and countries with countries, arriving at a global picture.

In fact, an international conference, as part of the New Global History initiative, took place in October, 1999 to undertake exactly these tasks. Called "Mapping the Multinational Corporations", the project seeks to give visual form to what is happening economically on our globe. To complement the atlases featuring nation-states and their boundaries, it is compiling an atlas depicting the multinational corporations as they leap across such boundaries. We need to "see", not only understand the new globe aborning.¹³

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At this point, we may feel somewhat overwhelmed. There is such a plethora of problems to be found in the seemingly simple notion of globalization. Are we to take everything as our object of study? In one sense, the answer is "yes"; globalization as I have stressed, must be seen holistically, for each feature is connected to every other. Realistically, however, we can ignore huge swathes of ordinary history and concentrate initially on the factors of globalization enumerated earlier. Doing so, our tasks become limited research projects. Only gradually do we seek to reassemble the pieces, in turn further illuminating our empirical research efforts.

¹² See, for example, Karl Moore and David Lewis, *Birth of the Multinational*. 2000 Years of Ancient Business History—From Ashur to Augustus (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press, 1999).

¹³ The new atlas, to be called *Global Inc.*, is in process of being finalized, as are a digitalized version, allowing for constant response to changing data, and a CD Rom. A volume, containing the papers delivered at the conference, is also now in the editorial stage.

Nevertheless, it is evident that globalization as a real phenomenon threatens to overwhelm us, as does the attempt to conceptualize it. Even the name is contested. Alternative terms for globalization are globalism, glocalization as we have already noted, and globaloney. Perhaps even more importantly, globalization must be recognized as coming before us not only as an idea, or concept related to a process, but as an ideology, promoted by multinational corporations and by various media, and as an ideal, a new version of the brotherhood, and today we would add sisterhood, of humankind. In short, everything about the subject must be assumed to be a *problematique*.

Fortunately, as noted, research into the process of globalization is interdisciplinary in nature; many hands are turning to the task. After and along with the research, of course, are the policy issues. We do research not only for the abstract joy of understanding what is happening around us, but for survival purposes, as we seek to play an informed role in the global process. But first, as I have tried to make obvious, should come the research and analysis.

For by now it must be clear how complicated the subject of globalization is, and how an understanding of the process is so vital to our sense of where we are and how we have come to be there--wherever "there" is. In truth, globalization has redefined, and reoriented, as I have argued, our coordinates of space and time. Here on earth we now have a feeling of a "full earth", in the sense not only of our everywhere encountering other peoples, but in the sense that, as noted earlier, almost all of the planet's surface and increasingly its depths are becoming known to us. Such knowledge is being matched by our invasion of formerly "empty", "outer" space. But such "outer" space, in turn, is being increasingly drawn inward, as we reorder our sense of self on earth in terms of the new knowledge we are acquiring.

Difficult as it is to pin down, and correlated as it is with profound scientific, technological, and economic developments, a revolutionary transformation in consciousness, in self-consciousness, and in historical consciousness is taking place. This, in fact, may be the most important consequence of the globalization process. In sum, we are not only transforming the globe but ourselves as well. What could be more challenging than a prospect such as that?