



HISTORICAL WRITING AND THE GLOBAL TURN: PERSPECTIVES FROM A HISTORIAN OF AFRICA

INTERVIEWEE

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How can Global History come into dialogue with African history? How valuable are concepts of connections and entanglements as proposed by Global History? How can we use Global History in our research? In addition to exploring what Global History is, we were inspired to interview a researcher with extensive experience on the subject. In this conversation, Professor Andreas Eckert details his trajectory as Professor of African History and coordinator of the Global History Research Center (re:work), as well as how he conceptualizes Global History in his research field.

Professor Andreas Eckert holds the Chair of African History at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Humboldt University of Berlin. He joined the faculty in 2007 after teaching for five years at the University of Hamburg. Eckert has undertaken research as a guest professor at various international universities such as Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of Michigan. Since 2009, he has been the director of the International Research Center "Work and Human Life Cycle In global history" — re:work — at Humboldt University of Berlin.

His first books were *Die Duala und die Kolonialmächte: Eine Untersuchung zu Widerstand, Protest und Protonationalismus in Kamerun vor dem zweiten Weltkrieg* (1991) and *Grundbesitz, Landkonflikte und kolonialer Wandel: Duala 1880-1960* (1999). They are important contributions to understanding the role of colonialism in Cameroonian history, and how the colonial system (German and after the First World War, French and British) tried to manage labor and control land.

In recent decades, Andreas Eckert's research has examined the relations between African history, labor history and global history. He was a contributing editor to many multiauthor volumes, including *Globalgeschichte: Theorien, Themen, Ansätze* (2007), *Global histories of work* (2016), *General Labour History of Africa: workers, employers and governments, 20th-21st centuries* (2019), and *Corona and Work around the globe* (2021). With Marcel van der Linden, he published *New perspectives on workers and the history of work: Global Labor History*, in *Global History, globally: research and practice around the world* (2018) edited by Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier. He is also a regular contributor in German newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*. Most recently, he published *Geschichte der Sklaverei. Von der Antike bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (2021).

In addition to publishing, Eckert has built re:work into an important location for developing and promoting cutting edge research in the field of Global Labor History. It was founded in 2009 with the intention of focusing on engaging themes, including: how work and labor are conceptualized and how definitions change over time; how to globalize labor studies especially by integrating ideas and scholars from the Global South; re-examining the concept of the 'working class'; exploring notions of what is work and what *is not*, and the blending of these two (supposed) separate spheres; and examining the relationship between 'free' and 'unfree' labor (ECKERT; KOCKA, 2021). But perhaps re:work's greatest strength has been inviting and funding scholars from around the world to develop, share and critique each other's work as fellows based in Berlin. Time spent by these academics — ranging from budding scholars to renowned professors — at re:work has been a key element in the development of many books, articles, collaborations, conferences and workshops.

The following interview was an in-person conversation with Prof. Eckert covering questions shared ahead of time. We recorded in October of 2020, a few weeks before Germany's second COVID-19 lockdown. That being said, we followed proper protocols



to ensure all participants' safety. The interview took place at re:work in Berlin and was approximately two hours long. Afterwards, we transcribed the audio, made edits for grammar, and shared the transcript with Professor Andreas Eckert for minor changes and additions. We then made final adjustments before submitting to *Esboços*.

Throughout the interview, we sought to discuss questions which are relevant to young scholars who aim to use Global History in their research. We believe it particularly important to focus on methods and tools of the trade that can be implemented for those in early phases of their career. We also sought to include a brief overview of the field of Global Labor History and its changes over the last decade. By no means is this interview a complete exploration of all the themes we touch upon, but we sincerely hope it may pique your interest to further explore some topics covered and works mentioned.

To begin our conversation, could you tell us about your decision to study and specialize in African History at the beginning of your education?

This is a rather particular story. When I started to study history, French and journalism, Africa did not really interest me. The only place in Africa that I was interested in was South Africa, because when I grew up and went to school, in the late 70s, early 80s, the Anti-Apartheid Movement was rather strong, also in Germany and in my hometown Bremen. I had a schoolteacher who was very interested in this, and I also had remote relatives in South Africa. This shaped my interest in South Africa a bit. But otherwise, I came as an undergraduate to Hamburg University and my main idea was to focus on French history. But then, by the end of my first year, I attended a lecture course on the history of South Africa, and the professor told us about a new fellowship, funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to study for one year in Cameroon. One of the requirements was that you had to do an exam both in French and English, because Cameroon, due to its specific colonial history, is bilingual. My bilingualism was, I think, my only advantage, but still one nevertheless. I also applied out of curiosity, and some kind of lust for adventure. And then I got the grant. Before that I didn't really know where Cameroon was to be honest, but I learned quickly. A few months later, I was on the plane to Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital. I studied there for one year and was one of the very few non-black students on campus, which was an experience of its own. I also needed to do some journalistic work as part of my minor in journalism. I ended up working a couple of weeks for radio Cameroon, which was really interesting. After that year, I decided that Africa should be my focus.

In Hamburg, where I studied most of the time, the big advantage was that Africa, or African History, was part of the history curriculum. The chair of African History was integrated into the History Department, which was advantageous for me because I never studied Afrikanistik, or African Studies, but had focused on history. Then the other advantage was that one of the professors who taught French literature, which was my other minor, was very interested in African literature. We had classes on Cameroon and Mongo Beti, and I wrote a paper on Ousmane Sembène. That's how I came into African history. I did my MA, but afterwards it was unclear if I should become a journalist or do my doctorate. I briefly worked for German TV, but then decided to do my PhD. With a grant from the German Research Council (DFG), I returned to Cameroon for another 14 months for research and also spent some time in France.



After my defense, I had the opportunity to get an assistant professorship in Berlin, and then the story unfolds. That's more or less my trajectory.

When and why did Global History become a point of interest in your research?

I think when Global History slowly emerged in the early 2000s, I became interested because I was working on a couple of themes focusing on Africa that were closely connected to other places. At that time, we didn't use the term global but rather, Transnational or World History. During this time, I wrote an article on Africa and World History, trying to take stock of what has been written about Africa and the world and how it could be conceptualized (ECKERT, 2003). One of the interesting kinds of references for me was the Senegalese Cheikh Anta Diop, who is usually called an Afrocentrist. One of his main ideas was to reconfigure Africa's place in the world. How to rethink Africa's place in World History was something I became interested in. Then I realized that as a historian of Africa, because much of the research is focused on the period of colonialism, you are by default, forced to make linkages, many more than you would probably do if you worked on certain parts of German or Finnish history. And the more I read, and the more I did research, a number of questions emerged: I began to think more seriously about the concepts we use, and where they come from. How do they fit when analyzing the African context? Then I slowly started thinking about labor and work. This was used in Africa in a rather narrow way, only focusing on wage labor, which immediately led to a restricted view of what labor in Africa is about. In essence, it was a slow, but steadily growing kind of interest.

I realized in the early 2000s, as Global History got off the ground, with books like Christopher Bayly's excellent synthesis, which was published for the first time in 2004, that Africa did not play a very major role within this new approach (BAYLY, 2004). I also could see that when people talked about world regions within Global History, it was mainly Asia that was at the forefront. I often thought that it would be good to bring Africa into Global History and really think about why Africa is marginalized. Is it that Africa is not so important for Global History? Is it because of the way the core questions are framed?

In 2007 I moved from a professorship in Hamburg back to Berlin and there was an emerging group of young scholars focusing on Global History. Sebastian Conrad, myself and others, were very interested in this topic. In Berlin there was both an institutional and intellectual context for this new endeavor. That was very stimulating for me. From early on, the majority of those interested in Global History were also area specialists. We always insisted that Global History should be combined with an area of expertise. In 2007 we started the German language book series *Globalgeschichte*, Campus Verlag, which now already has more than 30 volumes.¹ This helped us to see what's going on in the field. That is in short, the long history of my engagement in Global History. However, I always insisted that African history is important and should be at the core of my academic work.

¹ *Globalgeschichte*, Campus Verlag. You can find the volumes on: https://www.campus.de/buecher-campus-verlag/wissenschaft/geschichte.html?tx_campus_list%5B%40widget_2%5D%5BseriesElement%5D=92&tx_campus_list%5B%40widget_4%5D%5BcurrentPage%5D=3&cHash=9fe8791f23494a506f0078949f53b9f1. Accessed: 12 Apr. 2021.

As Sebastian Conrad pointed out in *What is Global History?* there are three approaches to Global History: the history of everything, the history of connections and history based on the concept of integration. How do you define Global History in your work?

For me as for many others, Global History is really not a method but a perspective, a very useful one for a number of questions that helped me to see things differently. Many historians of Africa used to have or continue to have a rather insular view of African history. We often accuse, for good reasons, the history of Germany to be very narrow minded. But you also have narrow histories of Asia, Africa, and the Americas that don't see broader connections to their topics. I think Global History is something which has been a rather refreshing element to the writing of African history but with some fallbacks. To consider Africa in relation to Global History suggests valuable lines of connection to other fields of history and new perspectives on a number of topics, but also hopping on bandwagons. Global History allows historians to move across and beyond the geographical fields on which the profession has been organized, calling upon us to give as much attention to the particularities of other places as we (in my case: africanists) wish our colleagues would give to the specificities of African history.

Combining Global History and African history, Prof. Omar Gueye argued that “the success of global history is a positive development for African history” (GUEYE, 2008, p. 85). This is especially true in mobilizing historians to chart connections between Africa and the rest of the world. This means going beyond the penetration of the continent by Islam, the Atlantic slave trade, and colonization. He also emphasized Global History in contributing to the creation of “true epistemological interconnection” as scholars began to mention Africa in the history they write. How do you see the use of Global History in the study of African history?

I think it's important but again, I presume that most protagonists of Global History now emphasize that Global History is not the *non plus ultra*. It's not the only way to do things. It's a certain perspective that might help for some problems, but might not be so helpful for others. I wouldn't see it as a kind of dogma or something you must employ, but something which might open up interesting, new ventures. In the beginning, for instance, everyone was very excited about entanglements. And it seemed to me that the attitude was that there are entanglements everywhere, but they had been overlooked. And our task is to discover them.

Now we are at the point where we are saying, yes there are entanglements, however they're not everywhere and their quality or their substance might differ and change a lot over time. The idea that everything is always entangled is simply not true. For me, Global History is an important way to bring Africa back to the debate of broader questions. And I think this is a way in which Global History has helped in certain ways to bring African history to the fore. Many of my colleagues in Africa make the critique that if Africa is integrated into Global History, it's only through the slave trade, which is one of the darker and nastier parts of African history. But I think there are multiple other ways in which this connection could be made, for example consumption, or the environment. Not only slaves were traded, but also many other items.



Moreover, I believe that specific kinds of intellectual histories could be valuable too. We could ask how certain concepts or more global general ideas were also shaped in connection with Africa, such as, did Africans contribute to broader ideas about what is freedom and what is unfreedom? I think there's a number of ways in which the inclusion of Africa can help us to discuss broader questions. One of the crucial points now is that you have to be very cautious in making universal claims. This means that Africa is not relevant for every topic, but for many more than we thought. For me this is one of the points where Global History is very useful for rethinking African history.

On the other hand, if people write about certain aspects of African history, there's no obligation to make it global. Of course, very regional cases can have broader implications and connections, but this cannot automatically be assumed. This point is important because some younger historians of Africa might feel the obligation to get some Global History street credibility, but this is not necessary. It's something that you can employ, and for many questions, such as the labor question, it might open up new interesting perspectives. But it's not a must. It's one perspective, among others, sometimes a more exciting one, but it is not a *Deus ex machina* for whatever historical problem you might have.

In addition to issues related to space, Global History also explores concepts of time. In a project you directed, entitled *Globalisierung der westlichen Zeitordnung*, you and your team analyzed the way colonial systems tried to implement standardization of time. How does a historian of work investigate the globalization of concepts of time?

One of the premises of this project, that was elaborated by Sebastian-Manès Sprute, was not to assume that colonialism came and introduced European time and then overnight this concept was around (SPRUTE, 2020). Rather to see it as a process and as part of a broader integration into the world, but as a constant struggle as well. I had written quite a bit on African bureaucrats working for the colonial administration. Within that research, themes of punctuality, a 'regular' working day, getting a certain number of breaks, as well as whether workers owned a watch played an important role. We asked how Africans used European time to their advantage, how they tried to undermine it, how they attempted to keep their own notions of time intact, such as during important periods of the agricultural cycles, as well as using time as an instrument of power. Even in discussions following E.P. Thompson's famous article on the introduction of industrial time in capitalist Europe, the point was made that in industrializing Europe, there were always different time concepts around (THOMPSON, 1967).

For Africa, the aspect of co-existing time regimes is even more important. Not in a way of romanticizing it, but what does it mean on the ground that there's a new calendar and colonial working day schedule? The question of holidays is very important in the context of time. For example, what conflicts arise when the colonial calendar includes certain European holidays, such as the "Fête National", but ignores those of the local population? The project focused on the question of what does globalization mean in everyday life, especially in the realm of colonial administration? It was mainly set in Senegal and one of the big tensions was focused on local Muslim concepts of time in contrast to European ideas and where they clash, especially in the context of bureaucratization and administration. It also emphasized that we could build upon

certain notions of time, of punctuality, of certain working rhythms. One point was to describe the transformative power of European colonialism, but at the same time, to show that much of this transformation did not develop the way the colonial powers would have liked it to. It also complicated the teleological idea about globalization as something that came and then completely transformed local structures. Rather time was analyzed as a new site of struggle in the local context. In some ways it put pressure on people, but it also opened new opportunities, ways of maneuvering, and of getting positions of power.

Did Muslims in West Africa try to negotiate for days off that differed from the primarily Christian colonizers?

Yes, of course. For example, in contrast to Christians, Muslims have the primary day of prayer on Friday rather than Sunday. Thus, it was often difficult to *get all* of the people to work on Fridays, as well as during the five daily prayers. These times did not necessarily correspond to the breaks in a bureaucratic office. There was never a kind of solution. Sometimes the local protagonists found an arrangement and sometimes not. In any case, there was the constant struggle by Europeans to push an idea through and often they did not manage to do it completely. In many ways, some of the negative images and stereotypes about Africans emerged from the inability of the colonial powers to push through their agenda. The attempted transformation of time regimes is one example for this.

Since 2009 you have been the director of re:work, which has hosted more than 140 scholars from around the world. Can you tell us about the idea to create this institute?

It all began with an application to the Blankensee-Colloquien, a program organized by the Wissenschaftskolleg. The program addressed younger scholars, advanced postdocs or recently appointed professors, who could apply for funding to do an interesting interdisciplinary conference. I had already for a number of years been thinking about how to combine my interest in African history, my emerging interest in Global History and my interest in Social History. I eventually came up with a proposal combining these concepts by focusing on labor / work. I thought it was a good and timely topic, but it was also very broad.

Although I didn't get funding, there was a member of the Berlin Senate for research and education who was in the selection committee who found my proposal very interesting and promising. Through some other program line, she offered substantial funding to organize a couple of conferences to test my ideas out. In 2005 and 2006, Jürgen Kocka and I organized three conferences at the Berlin Social Science Center, under the heading "Rethinking Labour from A Global Perspective".² We invited many labor historians from all over the world to think through ideas of what Labor History could be. It was a time when traditional Labor History was still in a state of crisis. Labor smelled somehow old fashioned. But on the other hand, we could see a lot of

² "Rethinking Labour from A Global Perspective", from: H-Soz-Kult, 19 June 2006, more information at: www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-56188. Accessed: 1 Jun. 2021.

enthusiasm, especially from scholars from the non-European world including a number of colleagues from South Asia, Africa and Latin America.

We were getting positive feedback. People were interested in labor and not just the old, rather conventional, traditional trade union history, but analyzing it both as a political and cultural topic, and with interesting new methodological approaches. By sheer coincidence, the Federal Ministry for Education and Research started the Käte Hamburger Kollegs-program around this time in order to establish international research centers. This program resulted from a debate about how to internationalize as well as create more research content within the German universities. The idea was to set University based Institutes for Advanced Study. The call was launched, and we got funding. We started from scratch, not so much as a research center, but as a community of academic fellows. The initial idea was to annually invite a number of excellent scholars from all over the world to create an interdisciplinary global debate where fellows have the chance to develop or rethink a theme and do innovative work. The concept was to have a broad but thematic focus. We were aware of the fact that “labor” was a vast topic, and one attempt to focus the debate was to emphasize the aspect of generation and lifecycle. The basic idea was to critically engage with the concept of a “normal working biography” throughout an individual’s life cycle and life course. We viewed life course as a crucial tool to systematically frame and tame the vast topic of labor.

For the first year of re:work, we didn’t have many applications because there was a relatively short notice from the project’s approval to when we needed to accept applications. But after a few years, we had hundreds of applications. Very quickly re:work became a place where scholars wanted to come and share ideas. Right from the beginning we started to do our own initiatives, for example annual summer schools. We went with professors, post-docs and doctoral candidates to Africa, South Asia, South America including Brazil and organized workshops in cooperation with local scholars, mostly former re:work fellows. We built up networks around the world of scholars interested in and working on labor. Re:work was proactive in avoiding only having established scholars attend and rather invited diverse groups. Otherwise, we would have relied on the same two or three academic ‘mafia’-networks all the time.

Re:work has had a very diverse group of fellows from all over the world, including Brazil such as, Sidney Chalhou, Paulo Fontes, Henrique Espada Lima and João José Reis. What criteria has re:work had for how it chooses its fellows beyond the quality of their work, to have strong representation from scholars of the Global South?

For Brazil most fellows were focusing on histories of slavery. It was a very interesting development that, increasingly, historians of slavery, began to understand themselves also as historians of labor. In a way slavery studies and labor studies joined forces and saw many overlaps in the questions and perspectives utilized. In terms of selecting fellows, we never had quotas, or never did affirmative action. We tried to make sure that good people from different regions applied. Re:work didn’t ask people directly to come. All scholars had to go through our application proceedings and in the end, our international advisory board made the final selection. There was fierce competition.



We did have basic criteria for applicants as to the quality of their projects. There were two stages of a project where it made sense to apply. Either you were still very much at the beginning and just thinking about a new topic. In that case you could use the year at re:work to shape your ideas in discussion with others and to frame your project in potentially innovative ways. Or people already had done fieldwork and were just writing up. In that case you had the tranquility at re:work to write. At the same time, you could be positively intellectually disturbed by some interesting ideas from your co-fellows. You could also use the space to test certain arguments. So at re:work you could sit, have time to work, and at the same time, have the opportunity to exchange ideas with people coming from very different disciplines and research perspectives. But at the end of the day everyone shared a basic interest in the broader topic of labor.

We tried to have a mix of scholars, not only famous people, but also individuals who might not be as well-known but had projects that looked very interesting and promising. Every year we tried to put together a diverse fellow cohort, including people of different genders, ethnicities, and also varying ages. Re:work wanted to make sure that the fellows would be able to come together and hopefully create a thought-provoking group dynamic.

Sometimes it worked very well, sometimes it didn't. To be honest, it often had to do with the kind of intellectual flexibility and openness of the people as well as personalities. You couldn't predict the outcome. Sometimes you had intellectual coalitions which we thought would make an interesting team or trio, but in reality, it didn't work very well and they had little to say to each other. Each year part of the suspense and excitement was, will it work or not? An example of a success I remember was when we had the fellows Paulo Fontes (Brazil), Alex Lichtenstein (USA) and Toby Boraman (New Zealand), who together put on a workshop looking at labor movements in the 1970s. Another interesting coalition was Jamie Monson, a historian of Africa and Niels Petersson, an economic historian working on transport and globalization. They put together a workshop on the history of transport and labor. These are just two examples of the many interesting and fruitful experiences, where we brought people together, and each profited from some unexpected questions and inquiries through interactions with other disciplines or people from other regions.

How do you think this has affected the work produced by re:work scholars over the years?

As the former rector of the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*, Wolf Lepenies, once said, if people leave with the same project they arrived with, something went wrong. In some ways, this was also the idea we had. The environment we attempted to create was one of productive destabilization. There were people who were working on one theme, who received feedback and might critically rethink some of their points. Some were really open to this, but in other cases fellows just didn't want to be intellectually disturbed.

I think this is the best such an institution can offer. You spend a lot of time with your own work and then put it to debate in a context where you can get sharp but not devastating criticism. We created a kind of intellectual atmosphere that was driven by conviviality and also solidarity, without necessarily being too nice about each other's work.

This is the kind of debate which is crucial to develop a field or certain idea, but at the same time can signal if an idea is a dead end. We regularly had historians who thought what anthropologists do is too narrow and at the same time anthropologists asked, how could historians talk about big concepts without any grounding in certain areas? There was always this broader skepticism and irritation, but on the other hand, I think we often had a atmosphere of creative misunderstanding. By and large it worked well. It had to do with the institutional frame and that we managed in most cases to provide an atmosphere where everyone thought he or she was equally important and taken seriously. What definitely helped is that we socialized outside of work, such as cooking for each other or visiting museums together. This created a sense of solidarity and especially cooking proved to be a huge equalizer. Many told us that cooking for the group was much more difficult and anxiety inducing than presenting their paper.

Re:work as a research institution fits into a lineage that began with schools such as the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. With Global Labor History as its focus, fellows have not only been budding young scholars but also established thought leaders such as Frederick Cooper, Marcel van der Linden, Sandrine Kott and Sebastian Conrad. A primary nexus of research has always been the relationship between work and life course. Looking back at what has been produced by the various fellows and summer academy participants, are there any through-lines that were not initially expected but that you think will be part of the re:work ‘legacy’?

In many ways we have to admit self-critically, that the link between labor and life course only works to a certain extent. Our idea that people who arrived at re:work without any previous thoughts about life course, would be stimulated enough to then integrate it into their project did not really happen. The environment intensified a focus on life course for people who already came with a certain idea about it, and how it could fit into their project. But many people came and left without really thinking that life course was a useful tool for their project. In the end, there were a couple of fellows who produced very good work applying the concept of life course. For example, one of the final volumes of re:work, edited by Josef Ehmer and Carola Lentz, focuses on life course and generation questions. There are also extremely interesting articles from a number of fellows of different cohorts who used life course as an approach. I think in the end, it proved to be an interesting and useful topic, but not as dominant and as visible as we initially thought.

On the other hand, there were questions that never lost importance regardless of the specific fellow year. For example, the question about what is work and what is non-work? Where are the grey zones between them and who has the power to define work? How to conceptualize work, where does work end? Analyzing work “beyond wage labor” became increasingly important as it allowed for marginalized groups and their activities to form part of Labor History — for example housework, care work, children’s work, sex work, prison work or the work of police and soldiers. However, when everything is work, then as an analytical category, it is rather useless. What about the political dimension of it? Labor as struggle, does this crucial aspect not disappear when, for example, drinking beer or going to the gym is described as work? These are some questions that remained crucial throughout the years of re:work.



“Free” and “unfree” labor has always been a hotly debated topic. What exactly does it mean? The Brazilian contribution has been very important here, because there has been an intense debate about the notion of the slow death of slavery in Brazil, and how this process also correlated with specific notions as well as practices of work. What did it mean for a Brazilian slave who was suddenly formally free? Was there any change in his or her daily struggles and practices and rooms for negotiations?

Are you referring to the ambiguity of freedom? For example, the question of whether freedom is actually a better condition in certain circumstances or sometimes not?

Yes, the ambiguities of freedom constituted a topic that came up a lot. In this context, we discussed the topic of how practices and notions of work and labor are connected globally. What does Global Labor History mean? Where can we see connections and where do we not see them? If you look at your project with a global perspective, how can that change your topic? What kind of new questions do you ask? How helpful are they? We also approached how to write a Global Labor History, and whether it is a “bad thing” when someone thinks that their topic can’t be globalized or can’t be framed within a global perspective? We approached the obvious issues about different disciplinary approaches to labor, as well as the promises and limits of more quantifying approaches, of which we had very few opposed to more qualitative methods.

The question about comparison versus entanglement repeatedly came up. Is it something that we can bring together or not? In essence, there was not one singular big theme, but a couple of underlying issues that came up with differing intensity throughout all the years.

Currently, we are in the middle of producing three volumes to summarize ‘the re:work legacy’.³ They are broken up into themes: one is on life course and relations between generations, the other focuses on labor, laborers, entrepreneurs, and capitalism, and the third focuses on broader aspects, for instance, welfare, and slavery versus free labor. We are also potentially working on a publication that is a ‘best of’ the contributions of PhD students who attended our summer schools.

Your experience as director of a Global History of work research center — re:work — allowed you to have had contacts with different scholars from across Europe and the world. How do you describe the Global History panorama currently? Which universities, research groups or networks might you highlight? After more than ten years, do you see a change in the trajectory of Global History?

Global History has become very popular, especially among younger generations. There is huge demand and Berlin is arguably an important site for Global History. At Humboldt and Free Universities, we have a Master program in Global History, which attracts many students from all over the world. In addition, our graduate program in Global Intellectual History experiences high demand and we have more individual initiatives, especially through the Free University around Sebastian Conrad’s chair.

³ You can find the three volumes on this website: *Re:work Lectures*. <https://www.degruyter.com/view/serial/RLEC-B>.

So here in Berlin there are a lot of both institutional programs, as well as individual scholars focusing on different Global History projects.

Then there are other locations that have developed as centers for Global History. In Germany, there is Leipzig, which is a very important site, as well as Munich, where Roland Wenzlhuemer is building up a center. These are all crucial steps to institutionalize Global History, which is important so that we have stable programs and centers of study and research. In some other countries within Europe, such as France, people are still very reluctant to utilize this approach. In Paris, for instance a number of initiatives were started but then didn't really get off the ground. In the Netherlands, we need to wait and see. At the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, under Marcel van der Linden's research directorship, there was a strong focus on Global Labor History. However, after his retirement this is changing and there is more emphasis on migration. It often depends on individuals as to whether certain traditions or trajectories are continued. I think Global Labor History still has a place in Amsterdam but is not as prominent as it used to be. And, yes, in other countries like Italy and Spain you have curricula in Global History. Outside Europe, Global History continues to be prominent in the United States. However, in Latin America, Africa, South Asia, but also in countries like Japan, Global History is still met with a lot of reluctance.

All in all, this is typical of historiographical movements. The fascination of the beginning is a bit gone. The big conceptual struggles and debates are over for now and we are currently in the bread-and-butter phase of research. The majority of scholars test out how you can do Global History with a concrete topic or research question in mind. This means that big comprehensive books attempting to establish the field like Bayly's or Osterhammel's are not being written any more, but the main bulk of studies and publications is being done on more specific questions. I think this is, in many ways, an exciting phase. Global History approaches are becoming routine in a way. It is a rather normal thing to do. Researchers test out, through their individual studies, how far they can get with this perspective versus others. In some ways, we are figuring out the limits of this perspective. At the same time, there has been ongoing criticism about Global History, for example regarding its fetishization of mobility and that it only examines mobile people and ignores the others. It is not yet clear to what extent the renationalization at the political level will affect Global History. Somehow ironically, this renationalizing is a topic *par excellence* for Global History. It is connected to the question of why under the current global circumstances, there is a resurrection of the idea of going back to a specific national framework. This is a very global topic and can only be understood in a global framework.

Of course, there has always been uneasiness among area study specialists, as to what extent Global History is not betraying some of the essential features of specific regions — having deep knowledge about someplace including languages and a complex understanding of the culture. There has been much methodological debate and exercise as to how Global History is best practiced as a collaborative enterprise. This is especially pertinent, when researchers combine topics and work in many different languages. In these circumstances, if you still want to do mainly primary research, unless you are an extreme genius, it's very complicated to do so. In many ways, Global History invites us to do more collaborative research, which pushes against the traditional structures of our institutions. For example, typically as a historian, you are still expected to write single authored big books. Collaborative research projects have often been discussed but rarely occur. I mean, you do have more collaborative

projects, but not on the level of a thesis, for instance. At this level it is still impossible because in the end, you are supposed to publish your individual monograph. Global History as a constituted field is developing in less spectacular ways, but has become normalized. It is one approach among many others. People have found out that Global Historians are not keen to “kill” the writing of German or other national histories. In reality, if you look at job advertisements, applicants are often asked to have something of a global profile, but it is not as if there are suddenly many more chairs or positions specifically dedicated to Global History. Still, it is now probably more helpful for your academic profile to claim that you are able to employ this perspective in your work than it was 20 years ago. That is probably a sign of success. There will always be people who say, “Global History is superficial” and so on. But perspectives related to Global History have shaped the writing of history in general. The topoi of mobility or the search for entanglements are widespread by now, and at the same time these perspectives are increasingly challenged from within Global History. This is as it should be, I think.

Once the global perspective becomes normalized, the good old days of huge excitement and the feeling of being avant-garde seem to be over. But in many ways, I would consider this development as a success: the global perspective has proven to be not the only way, but one established and useful way, to look at a number of historical problems.

Regarding historical writing, which methodologies should historians pay more attention to when implementing a Global History perspective?

The idea from early on, that the main theories or protagonists of Global History very much emphasized, was that a Global History is not the history of everything, but an approach that emphasizes a certain perspective, for example to find out whether or how a very local phenomenon is connected with broader trends, is part of broader networks and so on. Global History does not mean to have at least two or three continents in your study, but it might be something rather limited. For example, if you look at a certain handicraft from a specific village, you could ask where do these products go? It could be that the result of a global perspective is that you only find out that the product was sold to two or three villages close by, or that these items are widespread all over the world. Maybe this village is at the nodal point of the production of these items on a global level, but perhaps it isn't. As I said, the global perspective is not about proving that things are globally connected, but about seeing if and how far these things are connected. The assumption is not that everything must be connected, but that they could be connected. It is true, we usually do not assume that things are insular, and that people are only shaped by the influences of the neighbors from the village next door. I see much of the work in Global History following this path.

This seems connected to the idea that places and things can also not be connected and that this is also an important point.

Yes, I think a couple of people such as Fred Cooper, Ravi Ahuja and others argue that there's always a danger of writing history backwards when you assume certain networks as an organizing principle, because then you also look at specific groups in the past, especially if they are mobile, and forget about the others. I made this point many years ago. The fact that in South Asian history, you have so much



research on maritime labor and seafarers, and very little on small agrarian peasants, is part of this focus on global mobility. With this focus on mobilities, you may forget about the fact that immobility is the crucial other side of the coin. The mobility of a few is based on the immobility of others. This is important to keep in mind and not just emphasize that everything is entangled.

Researchers should not argue that a place is only interesting because some people went away and came back. It may also be interesting to examine a case in which nobody went away at all, or when people did go away, perhaps those who stayed are more interesting to look at. This is all very abstract. However, I think there should be caution to reflect about some of the things that led to the breakthrough of Global History and show that there were not just stagnant people living in the Global South who never moved until the Europeans pushed them. Rather there was a lot of mobility and activity before, and continued to be without the control of the European colonizers. There is, however, a certain danger that this becomes a caricature. It can lead to a kind of, 'we were global too' argument, which reminds me of the arguments made by earlier generations of Africanist historians. In what was one of the earliest general histories of Africa written by an African, Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Burkina Faso for example attempted to show that in pre-colonial Africa 'we also had Parliaments, or we also had cities' (KI-ZERBO, 1972). It was important to show that Africa had a rich and complex history before the Europeans arrived, but this argument implied a certain North Atlantic model as the main reference point. And now, the focus on mobility is again based on a model coming from the North Atlantic realm. The idea that you just have to show that there was a lot of mobility in other parts of the world, is to still subscribe to a North Atlantic assumption of what is normal. This "trap" is something scholars continue to reflect upon and frame their work accordingly.

To finish, your book *Global History of Colonialism* will be published in 2022 by Princeton University. Could you give us a brief overview and commentary on what ways the Global History of colonialism could help us to rethink the legacy of this period?

First of all, colonialism is very much thematically back, and in a way, I have a feeling that current thinking about it is often going in two extremes. This is a step back from a very interesting and differentiated debate about colonialism that has developed since the 1990s. Let me explain a little bit about what I find to be the current extreme ideological camps. On the one hand, there are those who now claim that colonialism was not that bad, quite the contrary that it brought a lot of "civilization" to the colonized. This is simply whitewashing. While related authors admit that there was a bit of violence, they counter that colonialism brought schools and hospitals and other good things. It is the Niall Ferguson argument on colonialism and Empire (FERGUSON, 2008). On the other hand, you have the view of colonialism as a very violent, racist and nasty enterprise. This view also ascribes a lot of power, in fact immense power to the colonizers. I understand that agency is a complicated tool and concept. But I think there's a certain tendency to underestimate the fact that for instance colonized Africans did a lot of things to come to terms with colonialism. Many arranged themselves to see possibilities to get something out of colonialism, or to fight against it. These intricacies are important. There was no colonial modernity, which was true for all colonized

regions. A global view might help to see what colonialism meant in different contexts at different times.

Now you're very quickly accused of relativizing colonialism, but I think it is important to see that colonialism was many things. Yes, it was based on violence and on very racist hierarchical ideas and this is nothing you should talk away. And even the famous civilizing mission was in many ways a racist, paternalistic viewpoint. Alternatively, I like the term Sara Berry coined, that colonialism was 'hegemony on a shoestring' (BERRY, 1992). I think that this very nicely describes what colonialism often meant on the ground. And I believe it is important to keep this differentiation in the picture in order to think about the historical legacy of colonialism. Why did so many things continue? Why if you look at the economic relations between Africa and Europe, is there still this colonial like relationship that Africans mainly produce the raw materials and others do something with it and also make the most profit? Why did racial ideas, on which colonialism was built, survive? Also how did Africans, for instance, make their way through it? And what was their take on it?

A number of recent contributions to the debate seem to suggest that colonialism was either something good or bad. My interest is not to belittle colonialism, nor to talk away the brutal and nasty elements that are structurally part of colonialism, this is not the point. The question is to explain why certain things develop in certain ways. And also important is the insight that so much of colonialism was built on a European paternalistic view, that they were superior to others. Equally crucial to an understanding of colonialism is the way colonizers used violence, often spectacularly, but not forgetting daily violence. But that's not all one needs in order to explain transformations that colonialism provoked.

One of the best approaches to studying colonialism, although very abstract, is to say that it was a huge transformation, but this transformation was not always under the control of the colonizers. This is an important point. It does not mean that now the colonized are responsible for the mess that colonialism left. But it is a move away from the perspective that the Europeans were omnipotent, and either played dirty tricks on Africans or killed them. I think this is not what colonialism was mainly about. These aspects were important parts of colonialism, but it is not sufficient to explain what was going on. And yes, this is also connected to the whole question we have here in Germany right now, asking where racism has come from? Why do Germans have the utmost difficulty to imagine that a black person can be German?

I think these are interesting questions, but you can't analyze them by just having a very narrow view of what colonialism was about. My book will hopefully be a contribution to a more complex debate about what colonialism was, without making any attempt to belittle the very devastating dimension that colonialism had.

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