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# INTERVIEW WITH MATTHIAS MIDDELL

ENTREVISTA CON MATTHIAS MIDDELL

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Matthias Middell (1961, Leipzig, Germany). PhD in modern history from the University of Leipzig in 1989. Specialist in history of historiography, global and transregional history, and history of intercultural transfers. Director of the Global Dynamics Research Centre and Vice-President for Campus Development: Internationalization and Cooperation, University of Leipzig, Germany. Member of the Board of the International Committee for Historical Sciences for the period 2015-2026.

## INTERVIEW WITH MATTHIAS MIDDELL

Poznań, Poland, August 24, 2022

*Today is Wednesday August 24th, I'm with Matthias Middell. First of all, thank you for accepting this interview because this is a big project. This is going to be the third book and my goal is to let Mexican scholars and students know about other ways of making history. I think everybody has something to say, it is important to hear those voices.*

Ok. If it is for the sake of diversity.

*First of all, I would like to know about your origins and why did you decide to become a historian.*

I was born in April 1961 in Leipzig. The date is a little bit important because it was just before the wall was erected and my parents intended to leave Leipzig at the time, but since I was born in April, they decided to stay for a little bit longer until I was out of the first weeks. As a consequence, we stayed due to the wall. Until 1989, I never experienced the alternative to go somewhere else, while my parents had that in mind. So, I went to school and enrolled at Leipzig University<sup>1</sup> and I was fascinated by its approach to teach rather World History than national History. It was one focus of the department there, and that was the reason why I decided to enroll at Leipzig instead of Berlin -very much qualified in National History teaching-, or any other East German University. But of course, when we went through training, we were also confronted with national History and all the techniques of how to study local and regional histories. It was not a pure focus on World History alone, but it was, to me, a very attractive feature that we were confronted with Latin American history, African history, as well as Eastern European history, represented by really good scholars who were truly familiar with the historiography of these regions. They invited scholars from these regions so that our study was, even against the limited possibility to leave the country, very international. That resulted also in an interest in learning some languages and to be prepared for a kind of cross use of archives from different origins, and not only the archives in your own country, holding documents in your mother tongue. That was highly attractive to me. My father was a German studies scholar by training, and I was, at the time, in this first years of puppeteering rebellion against everything that was related to ideas, culture, texts. I was much more interested in economic history, social history, material history and learned, only afterwards, that, of course, you can't understand a materialistic view of history without dealing with culture as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Leipzig University in Saxony, Germany was founded on 2 December 1409. <<https://www.gkr.uni-leipzig.de/>> [Accessed: August 5th 2023].

In Leipzig, traditional German historiography, which we know from our studies, like Leopold von Ranke,<sup>2</sup> was not the most important point of view?

No, you have to see that Leipzig was, of course, one of the important universities before World War I and had the same curriculum as many other German universities had. But at the same time, Karl Lamprecht<sup>3</sup> had already promoted an alternative cultural and world history approach. He launched a tradition that was continued through the various political regimes. Also after 1945, it went on with Walter Markov,<sup>4</sup> who developed from a specialist in Balkan's and international relations histories into an expert of revolutionary history both Europe and decolonizing Africa and more broadly into one of the few authors of the times actively promoting world history. This East German variant of world history referred to Marxist internationalism and the tendency of global or universal thinking in Marxism.

National history was explicitly criticized as being bourgeois and helping bourgeois forces to dominate the country, while international perspective had its conjunctions. But, of course, also this world was not black and white. From time to time, the political leadership expressed heavy political criticism due to the internationalist agenda and used national history for the legitimation of its own dominance. There was no complete linear and continuous development, but the many disciples of Markov, trained particularly in the 1950s, specialized in the various, what we would call now, area histories. One was specializing in the history of Egypt, the other in the history of Cameroon, and the third one in the history of the Rio de La Plata region – some with a focus on world history narratives, others satisfied with the reconstruction of the history of a single country or a world region at large.

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<sup>2</sup> Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), German historian. The publication of *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker: von 1494 bis 1535*, Leipzig, Reimer, 1824, based on documentary sources, is considered to be the foundation of scientific history in Germany. His book was translated to English as *History of the Latin and Teutonic nations (1494 to 1514)*, London, G. Bell and sons, 1887 (Bohn's standard library). In Mexico, Wenceslao Roces translated and compiled a miscellaneous series which he entitled *Pueblos y estados en la historia moderna*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948. See Juan A. Ortega y Medina, "Teoría y crítica de la historiografía científico-idealista alemana (Guillermo de Humboldt-Leopoldo Ranke)" in María Cristina González Ortiz y Alicia Mayer (eds.), *Obras de Juan A. Ortega y Medina, 5. Historiografía y teoría de la historia*, pp. 161-388, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Facultad de Estudios Superiores Acatlán, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915), German historian whose approach to German history in his *Deutsche Geschichte*, 12 vols. (plus 2 incomplete), Berlin, R. Gaertners, 1891-1909, generated a polemic on the methodology of historical science (Methodenstreit der Geschichtswissenschaft). See Georg G. Iggers, "The Historian Banished: Karl Lamprecht in Imperial Germany," *Central European History*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1994, pp. 87-92. JSTOR, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4546392>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>4</sup> Walter Markov (1909-1993), historian of the German Democratic Republic, imprisoned from 1935 to 1945 for being a member of the Communist Party and for his activist resistance to the Nazi regime. He opposed a Eurocentric view of history and built bridges of academic cooperation between East and West Europe. Author, among others, of *Serbien zwischen Österreich und Rußland 1897-1908*, (Serbia between Austria and Russia 1897-1908), Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1934; *Weltgeschichte im Revolutionsquadrat*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1984, and *Zwiesprache mit dem Jahrhundert*, (Dialogue with the Century), documented by Thomas Grimm, Berlin, Aufbau Verlag, 1989. <[https://saebi.isgv.de/files/saebi/pdf/9318\\_Walter\\_Markov\\_\(1909-1993\).pdf](https://saebi.isgv.de/files/saebi/pdf/9318_Walter_Markov_(1909-1993).pdf)> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

*Even if you were on that side of the iron wall.*

The first generation of East German historians came into an academic career in the 1950s, so before the wall was erected. It was relatively easy to travel until 1961. Then there was a period between 1961 and 1964-65 when it was really close to impossible to travel, but then established people were allowed to travel again. Particularly, when they were important for the international image of the GDR (German Democratic Republic). Scholars like Manfred Kossok,<sup>5</sup> who developed into an eminent and internationally recognized specialist in Latin American history, traveled a lot to Chile, Peru, Argentina and so on in the late 1960s, and when you see then [Salvador] Allende<sup>6</sup> coming into power, it was attractive to connect to Chilean intellectuals in the early 70s, for example. So there was another opportunity to travel, not so much for students and PhD students, but for the professors it was possible.

*And your PhD thesis was on...?*

Originally, I was intended to do something on African history. So, I met with Walter Markov and told him “Can I write something about the counterrevolution in African liberation movements and moments?” and he told me “Yeah, that's a nice topic, that's interesting, but to go to Africa you will face difficulties, political difficulties in the country, therefore, I would advise you to do something on the French Revolution”. That was not without selfish interests because he was already at the age of close to 80, and the bicentennial of the French Revolution approached. And he searched for young people who could replace him in the various activities at the time. So, I was decided -I hadn't decided truly myself-, to devote my thesis to the French Revolution,<sup>7</sup> but I still went for that history of the counter-revolution. So, I was more interested in all these stories of how intelligently the Conservatives resisted to the revolution than in another story of revolutionary heroism.

*And then, when you made your habilitation, you started doing this World History writing at the age of discipline building.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Manfred Kossok (1930-1993), German historian specialized in comparative revolutionary history, with a special focus on the history of Latin America. Author of, among others, *Im Schatten der Heiligen Allianz. Deutschland und Lateinamerika 1815-1830*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1964 and 1492. *Die Welt an der Schwelle zur Neuzeit* [El mundo en el umbral de la modernidad], Leipzig, Leipzig Edition, 1992. See also Matthias Middell (ed.), *Vom Brasilienvertrag zur Globalgeschichte. Zum 70. Geburtstag von Manfred Kossok*, Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2002 and Lluís Roura, Manuel Chust (eds.), *La ilusión heroica. Colonialismo, revolución e independencia en la obra de Manfred Kossok*, Castellón, Universitat Jaume I, Servei de Comunicació i Publicacions, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Salvador Allende (1908–1973), President of the Republic of Chile from november 3, 1970 to september 11, 1973. <[https://www.bcn.cl/historiapolitica/resenas\\_biograficas/wiki/Salvador\\_Allende\\_Gossens](https://www.bcn.cl/historiapolitica/resenas_biograficas/wiki/Salvador_Allende_Gossens)> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>7</sup> Matthias Middell, “Die Konstituierung der französischen Konterrevolution 1788-1792” (The constitution of the French counter-revolution 1788-1792), PhD, 1989, Leipzig University.

<sup>8</sup> Habilitation in the field of modern cultural and social history with the thesis “Weltgeschichtsschreibung im Zeitalter der Verfächlichung. Das Institut für Kultur- und Universalgeschichte in Leipzig 1890-1990” (World History Writing at the age of discipline building. The Institute for Cultural and Universal History in Leipzig 1890-

That was much later. I did my PhD in 1989 and then I originally intended to do something on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some kind of history of European counter-revolutions in 1848 for example. However, due to all the trouble that emerged then with the unification of Germany and the reconfiguration of the academic system, this habilitation failed due to resistance by some of the newly appointed professors. I had to search for a new topic. And then I “betrayed” somehow the lessons I learned from my original academic advisers by devoting my habilitation to German history of World history writing. I thought it interesting to investigate how a tradition in World history writing continues from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with completely different scholars, in completely different political contexts. It fascinated me that obviously very different scholars populating the same office one after the other came to the same interest in writing world history irrespective of what their original topics had been. That sounds of course a little bit mysterious, but I guess there is an infrastructural element in it that universities don't change their structures so fast. It was of course not the cement of the walls but the structures of the curriculum and the expectations by colleagues that invited the successive professors from Lamprecht onwards to investigate world history. They all liked to be on the opposite side to the mainstream, and, also to write world history at times where national history was so much at the center of attention. And thirdly, I guess there was a high degree of individualism; when you look into Markov, into Hans Freyer,<sup>9</sup> into Karl Lamprecht and others, they are heavily individualistic. They were not really team players. But, they had always the intention to change individually the narrative of world history to a certain extent. For Markov, it was decisive that the liberation revolutions in Africa, Latin America and Asia, gave people a new agency in their anti-colonial fights. That was completely new in the 1950s. We have to put this idea into the context of ideas expressed, for example, by Franz Fanon.<sup>10</sup> That was the very beginning of something we are very familiar today with: postcolonial or anticolonial approaches.

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1990), Leipzig Universität, 2002. Published as *Weltgeschichtsschreibung im Zeitalter der Verfachlichung und Professionalisierung. Das Leipziger Institut für Kultur- und Universalgeschichte 1890-1990*, 3 vols, Leipzig, Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Freyer (1887–1969), German sociologist and philosopher. In 1925, he founded the Sociology Department at University of Leipzig, developing a branch of sociology with historical basis, known as the Leipzig School. Author, among others, of *Theorie des objektiven Geistes. Eine Einleitung in die Kulturphilosophie*, (Theory of the Objective Mind. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Culture), Leipzig, B.G. Teubner, 1923 and *Gesellschaft und Geschichte*, (Society and History), Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1937. See also Carlos Jiménez Pérez, “La sociología de largo alcance en Hans Freyer”, en Silvia Giménez Rodríguez, Giuliano Tardivo coords., *Proyectos sociales, creativos y sostenibles*, Albacete, Asociación Castellano-Manchega de Sociología (ACMS) 2013, pp. 597-612.

<sup>10</sup> Frantz Omar Fanon, (1925-1961), French-Caribbean revolutionary, psychiatrist, philosopher and writer, of Martinican origin, made important contributions on decolonization. Author, among others, of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1952. Published in Spain as *Piel negra, máscaras blancas*, Madrid, Ediciones Akal, 2009, and *Les damnés de la terre*, Paris, Éditions François Maspero, 1961 préfacé par Jean-Paul Sartre, 1961. Published in Mexico as *Los condenados de la tierra*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963, (Popular, Tiempo presente, 47). See Blanca Zulema Ballesteros Trujillo, “Sobre el pensamiento de Frantz Fanon en Piel Negra, Máscaras Blancas y ‘Racismo y Cultura’, entre otras reflexiones relevantes”, in *Temas Sociales*, n. 39, 2016, pp. 171-188.



What attracted me was the observation that this intention to challenge the mainstream went on and on over more than a whole century and has, in fact, very much characterized the work of the university, as a whole, not only of the individuals. But people have done their PhD's, foreign students came to that place because they had heard that this was a topic and a focus of interest, partnerships were established between Leipzig and other universities going in the same direction. It's interesting how this web of motivations to do something works. I tried to reconstruct it in as much detail as possible in my habilitation. And one of the reviewers said "this is of course only the prolegomena to your own future work. After you have deconstructed the traditions, now you have to do yourself something into that direction" and this became a motivation for the next steps in my career.

*And you didn't go back to your African theme?*

In fact, this world history approach gave me the opportunity to go for the first time to Africa. I had never done anything about Africa. I had given up that idea very early. But I met scholars from Cameroon like David Simo,<sup>11</sup> with whom I discussed intensively postcolonial approaches to world history writing. In Addis Ababa, I joined the PhD program on Peace and Security in Africa,<sup>12</sup> which allows me now to be more often in Africa and to supervise African PhD students, to deal with African realities very much in detail, with regional histories of Ethiopia. I used this world or global approach to come back to my original interest in African affairs.

*I understood that at the university there were three departments: Latin America, Africa and Asia.*

No, these were not departments. There was one department of history, built in 1968, but before, there were two departments, one on German history and the other on world history. And within this latter department there were different streams. But then the professorship in African history migrated to a newly built African Studies Department. Asia was forced to leave for Berlin<sup>13</sup> in 1968, Humboldt University became the Center for Asian Studies,<sup>14</sup> and Latin American History (which was officially transferred to Rostock University in the North of the GDR) remained also a focus at the original department in Leipzig, now institute for general history. So, the institutional network again became more complex and involved more people, becoming more interdisciplinary. The African Studies Department had not only historians but

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<sup>11</sup> David Simo, (n. 1951), historian from Cameroon. Author, among others, of «L'intelligentsia allemande et la question coloniale», in: Alexandre Kum'a Ndumbe III (Ed.), *L'Afrique et l'Allemagne de la colonisation à la coopération: 1884-1896; (le cas du Cameroun)*, Yaoundé, Éd. Africavenir, 1986 and co-coordinator with Michel Espagne and Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, of *Afrikanische Deutschland-Studien und deutsche Afrikanistik. Ein Spiegelbild, (Estudios germano-africanos y estudios germano-africanos. Una imagen espejular)*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2015

<sup>12</sup> The Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) at Addis Ababa University, established in 2007, is the premiere institute for education, research and policy dialogues on peace and security in Africa. <<https://ipss-addis.org/what-we-do/academic-programmes/ma-in-peace-and-security-studies/>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>13</sup> Freie Universität, Berlin <<https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/index.html>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>14</sup> Humboldt-Universität Zu Berlin <<https://www.hu-berlin.de/en>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

of course also linguists, economists, anthropologists, etcetera. And on the other hand, spanning now over the whole territory of the GDR with Berlin and Rostock<sup>15</sup> as well as many scholars in other places dealing with African and Asian history.

*North America is not there.*

North America was one of the central weaknesses of this institutionalization. No, there was no real study on North America. Foreign scholars were invited regularly to cover that gap, but there was not very much of a specialization in North American history.

*You have a text called “From colonial history in Latin America to global history”.<sup>16</sup> When you are thinking about globalization, does it include Latin America?*

Yes, for sure. But I have to explain that, in the meantime, the term globalization has been loaded with so many different meanings. Particularly in Latin America but also in parts of Africa, people understand globalization as the hegemony of the US or of a neoliberal model of governing the world. I don't read the term globalization that way. But I was confronted several times with the idea that globalization is the bad thing that comes from the Washington consensus. And therefore, I now would reformulate and would say we have different globalization projects in the world. One is the US-American, which is a very powerful one, no doubt. It is also attractive to many; many people in other countries have joined these activities to restructure their states and their economies and their social systems according to what we might call the logics of the Washington Consensus. It's not saying that this globalization project is not important, but it is not the only one. I'm pretty sure that there are many globalization projects in Latin America trying to propose a different reading of world history (building on the experience of “Independencia”) and to suggest an alternative organization of the world economy, its finance and its property rights – as for example the Group of the 77 did within the UN in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> I would call that also a globalization project, which is obviously a competing one to the US-American. Of course, the Russians had one during the Cold War, but you can also see that the French pursue one (or even several) since the first outreach to what became later Canada with their Francophonie. What I try to demonstrate is that there is not the one single and particular globalization project which is only worth investigating. We should be more interested in the potential of the Latin American globalization project as well as in many others. What we can

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<sup>15</sup> Universität Rostock <<https://www.uni-rostock.de/>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>16</sup> “De la historia colonial de Latinoamérica a la historia global a través de la historia comparada de la revolución. La obra de Manfred Kossok” en Lluís Roura y Aulinas, Manuel Chrúst (eds.), *La ilusión heroica: colonialismo, revolución e independencias en la obra de Manfred Kossok*, Castelló de la Plana, Universitat Jaume I, 2010, pp. 39-62 (América).

<sup>17</sup> “The Group of 77” (G-77) was established on 15 June 1964 by seventy-seven developing countries signatories of the “Joint Declaration of the Seventy-Seven Developing Countries” issued at the end of the first session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva. It provides the means for the countries of the South to articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the United Nations system and promote South-South cooperation for development”. <<https://www.g77.org/doc/>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].



learn then is how people deal for example with the indigenous traditions and people, how to offer them autonomy, how to organize coexistence with people of different “ethnic” belonging. Another specificity might be the capacity to use moments of world wars when big powers focus elsewhere for the economic development in Latin America. When the rest of the world is fighting, Latin America gains leeway for its own economic development. To mention only one further feature, we can look into a long tradition of self-understanding as a continent which is currently perhaps fading away with a split between those looking at the Atlantic and those looking at the Pacific. In contrast, the long common colonial history and its legacies have built a strong fundament of joint interest. And this is deeply rooted in all kinds of cultural representations when you look into the fictional literature or the cinema of Latin America, which are different and have different messages and different rhythms than other cinemas and literatures have.

*But global history goes way back. I mean, during the colonial times with the Spanish Empire, with the Portuguese Empire, there was a sort of globalization. All the possessions of the Spanish Empire had things in common. Can you call that part of the globalization or not?*

For sure, but I guess it goes much deeper into history. We have now the results of anthropological research that shows that the first people going out of Africa, have produced different types of genetical dispositions. Genetic history has discovered somewhere in Siberia the Denisov people,<sup>18</sup> a particular ethnic or genetic composition which gave birth to a certain way of resisting environment, but being also weak towards other environmental influences. So you can start globalization there because it is at the same time separation, individual streams of development on the one hand, and interaction by migration, by marriage, by exchange of cultural goods, etcetera. Some cultures start their narrative about their involvement into globalization later, but I would very much argue for dating back to the beginnings of interaction between human groups. And then there is a long history of confrontation but also cooperation between different globalization projects, already Fernand Braudel made us aware of this long history.<sup>19</sup> So, I guess we know a lot about this. What seems important to me in this context is the following: until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these different globalizations were in contact but were

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<sup>18</sup> In the Denisova caves in Altai, Siberia, the skeletal remains of a hominid that lived between 200,000 years ago were discovered in 2010. Jake Pearson, “Remains of three Denisovits and a Neanderthal were found in a Siberian cave”, *J News*, December 3, 2021, <<https://swordstoday.ie/remains-of-three-denisovits-and-a-neanderthal-were-found-in-a-siberian-cave/>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>19</sup> Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), French historian, member of the *Annales* School. During the years he was a prisoner in Germany in the Second World War, he wrote *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris, A. Colin, 1949 [*El Mediterráneo y el mundo mediterráneo en la época de Felipe II*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1953]. In this work, he develops three main strata: that related to geographical time and phenomena of long duration; that of social time or of medium duration; and that of individual time or of short duration. In addition, in order to develop a total history, he considered it essential to study the effects of economics and geography. Author also of *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme (XVe - XVIIIe siècles)*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1967 [edición en español *Civilización material, economía y capitalismo, siglos XV-XVIII*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1984 3 vols.], where he focused his study on what would reveal the underlying structures of history <<https://metahistoria.com/fernand-braudel/>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

able to retire from this encounter. Let's take China as an example, where it was decided not to expand further after the fleet had reached the shores of Africa. But during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we see the commodification of a lot of raw materials which opened opportunities for what we call industrial revolution. It went hand in hand with an ongoing division of labor. As a result a new situation emerged which I call the global condition, meaning that from that point onwards, humankind was no longer able to retire completely and consequently from this global encounter, and that makes an enormous difference. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, you had a chance to retire, to migrate out of this contact. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, this was no longer possible. Something new characterizes the situation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century compared to former periods of world history. We hear nowadays a lot about decoupling, de-connecting, de-globalizing, with the pandemic and the war in Ukraine in view, but I would remind people that the global condition continues even when changing its outlook. The division of labor which characterizes the global condition has not disappeared, on the contrary. It remains the fundament of a very much, but perhaps differently connected world.

*When you talk about globalization, does it mean that people lose their identity?*

No, not at all. First of all, there is not one globalization, and each of these globalization projects, produces identities. I normally hate the term identity. I would rather speak of identification because we identify several times with different things, depending on context, depending on age, depending on many other material aspects of our life. So, we have not this stable identity some right-wing people dream of where you can't escape from. Of course, I can escape from my identity if someone plants me into another culture. I have to adapt to that new situation and will do more or less successfully.

But you are completely right. There are enormous forces that come out of these identification processes and people identify with their position in the global competition. What I mean with this notion of globalization projects is not only a material sense of an economic positionality in world economy, but it is also identifying with the cultural and social features of this globalization project. And people of course know a certain music or a certain literature they see as "theirs" by heart, they position as losers or winners in international competition. They see themselves as the allies of the good guys or as the opponents of the bad guys, whatever that may mean in the concrete circumstances. Insofar, there are a lot of elements of identification in this positioning towards global processes, and so far, you see that globalizations as a bundle of overlapping and connected processes that may involve encounters and entanglements, produces also tensions and oppositions and positionalities towards something. And of course, we disagree about thousands of things, how to live our lives, and how to behave towards relatives and how to fight enemies, and how to use violence and many things more. And all are elements of our identification processes.

*You are mostly talking about economic aspects. How about intercultural transfers?*

This is another very important issue. I was trained a little bit during my early career steps, after my PhD, at the crossroads of cultural transfer theory and world and global history. I guess that the theory of cultural transfer, which is about appropriation of cultural goods into new contexts,

is one of the essential research strategies to analyze global connections. Most often the world does not follow what diffusionist theories assume, namely that something from A influences B and therefore B repeats what A has said. On the contrary, what happens is that B appropriates those things from A that are important to B. This implies a process of active selection by B to identify what is important to B and this happens relatively independent from what A wishes to be borrowed from his cultural repertoire.

*And it does not become C*

No! What is appropriated becomes an element of B but after the process B looks transformed since it has successfully integrated the new feature into its repertoire. We see that very much with poems, with literature, with ideologies being appropriated across borders. I would say intercultural transfers are very important to understand the outcome of encounters, not necessarily global encounters, but also transnational and regional ones. I see with some mistrust, the idea of authenticity, that you have to be authentic in your representation. People who sing songs from reggae tradition have to be from Jamaica or from Ethiopia instead of interpreting and appropriating into new contexts. There is this debate about appropriation of being a bad thing and leading to something like cultural death. I would insist that cultural danger or death comes with exploitation, with oppression, with marginalization, but not with the appropriation of an important cultural element by other cultures. Of course, we should not forget that this has again an economic background, because also most cultural features do not circulate without money. Culture is appropriated with the help of cultural industries, which is of course also financed and redistributes money from audiences to producers and the other way around.

*Let me go way back. We have the encounter of Spaniards and indigenous people. That is A against B. And then we have the Mestizo, which is a culture.*

I guess that is one of the very important contributions particularly of the Central American research to that topic, where we have this hybridization theory. The point here is that we have a very exceptional situation between A and B at the moment of the European invasion into parts of Central Latin America. Because it was really the genocide of peoples. They were killed by weapons and by viruses. And when you are definitely dead, you can't appropriate anything any longer. But this is rather exceptional. When we look at cultural encounters, most often the receiving culture remains the majoritarian culture also in colonial context. We should therefore not confuse this extinction of cultures with what happened in most parts of the world and also of Latin America where the indigenous people and their cultural production were and still are present in the processes of intercultural transfers which may even overlap with former hybridizations resulting from the massive importation of workforce into the plantation system. And that complicates the story, and I guess the interpretation of an emerging hybrid culture is a very important contribution from the Caribbean, but also from Canada, for example, where you have a similar debate about cultural hybridization. But it doesn't apply everywhere, which means, again, we have different global stories and global narratives, and global sensibilities; in different parts of the world and not necessarily everywhere the same.

*There are places where there was a huge genocide.*

Exactly. So, it was after the extinction of the original population easy to settle in and to proclaim cultural dominance. But even those cultures depend very much on the adaptation of European features to the new environment.

*We are talking also about the spatial history. We are also talking about the relationship between global history and connected histories. How do you deal with this? Comparison or connection?*

Let me start with the first. I became more and more fascinated with the problem that people tell the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a history of nationalization and nation-states. But then you realize, when reading historiography, that many people write about transnational configurations, that you have regionalisms of different kinds, that you have commodity chains obviously not being national, trans-whatever, transnational, transregional, etcetera. From what we describe, we have a much more diversified picture than of this “from empire to nation” narrative. I wondered about two things. One is, are we able to write the more complex narrative of how these different spatial formats emerge, mix, interact. And secondly, do we believe in this teleology towards the nation-state, and that is what our most recent project is about, to describe or to find the means to write a history that is more complex than the one from empire to nation. I don't believe that Russia is a nation-state. I don't believe that China is simply a nation-state, but there are elements of nationalization while, at the same time, there are imperial features, and this became very explicit with the aggression to Ukraine. And, insofar, I guess this will be one of the theoretical fundamentals of a new world or global history: to make the history of the spatial units to be investigated more complex than we had done it in the past. Now, on global and connected history, I guess that is a very debated issue because people insist so much on their categories. Some are believers in connected histories; others defend intercultural transfers. The third group is writing transnational histories, etcetera. I would say: “calm down, this goes all in the same direction. It is analyzing how separated entities behave under the condition of interaction and encounter”. And there are excellent scholars like Sanjay Subramanyam,<sup>20</sup> who call it connected history. But I'm pretty sure you could write the same history with the same evidence in terms of transregional history, for example. Not transnational because he deals so much with early modern times where we have no nations yet, but you could also describe the same phenomena in terms of intercultural transfers, so some of these distinctions are due much more to academic competition than to a real difference in methodology. When reading these books I think, more or less, they tell the same story and they do it with the same methodology and it is interesting rather to insist on their mutual familiarity than to insist on their differences.

*Anyway, either concept, connected history or global history is a dynamic concept.*

For sure, yes.

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<sup>20</sup> See the interview with Subrahmanyam en Zárate Toscano, V. (2024). *Aportaciones historiográficas en la voz de quince protagonistas*. Instituto Mora. Edition available in: <<https://doi.org/10.59950/IM.129>>

So, we can make things fit in there. At my round table,<sup>21</sup> I was suggesting that the idea of *Lieux de Mémoire* proposed by Pierre Nora can be exported. And my paper shows that it has gone from Asia to Africa to Australia to North America, and then I put some cases in Mexico where, consciously or not, people are doing this kind of work. And then, while doing the research in the libraries and in the book shops and on the Internet, I have found these connections. For example, Professor Hans Henning Hahn published books on the German and Polish *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>22</sup> They are connecting two different regions that have a common past in some ways. But then there is this interest of Étienne-François and others to put together the European *lieux de mémoire*, not in singular but in plural.<sup>23</sup> Conditions in Spain are so different from the conditions in France or in Sweden, and yet you talk about Europe, there is a European Union, there are *Europäische Erinnerungsorte*. In America, I'm not sure we can apply that and there is a lot of work needed to talk about the Latin American *lieux de mémoire*.

Oh, I'm sure you can. But we have to be careful with the word “can”. Does it mean, are you allowed? Of course, you are free to do so. Are you interested in doing so? What is exactly the motivation? When you look into Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*,<sup>24</sup> that was a concept developed to lament the decline of the French nation and its international status. Is it that interesting to those who are celebrating their independence and their emerging status? No. Is that the proper way to describe Europe? Some would say yes. We would like to have a narrative of decline for Europe. Others would dispute that. So, what you see is that Pierre Nora's concept has not gone from France to other places, but it has been appropriated by others for their own purposes. Étienne François was very keen to insist on overcoming the German-French opposition and to show a kind of European remembrance as he dreams of.

Are you interested in inventing a post-colonial Latin American history, a common Latin American history that is based on the idea to overcome European dominance? Then you would perhaps go back to places where slave were declared and left free, or you will select in particular places and moments where the indigenous people were included into the nation. Or you would perhaps look at places where, for the first time, enslaved people arrived and started shaping the history of, let's say, Brazil. Or you would wonder about the strange interaction when the Portuguese came on 15 caravels from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro fleeing Napoleon's superiority and transferring the center of their empire to Latin America. They transported everything they understood as European to the New World, and neither the clothes nor the bureaucracy was really appropriate to the new circumstances. The question, therefore, is not if you can (the material is always there) but what your purpose is when starting a history of *lieux de mémoire*. I'm really curious to look at this book and to analyze it as an answer to the question “What is

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<sup>21</sup> «La notion des Lieux de Mémoire au-delà de la France» round table where Pim den Boer, Eliana Dutra, Radikah Seshan et Lorina Repina made comments on a text I presented. 23e congrès du Comité International des Sciences Historiques, Poznan, Pologne, august 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Henning Hahn & Robert Traba, *Deutsch-polnische Erinnerungsorte*, 5 vol., Paderborn, Schöningh, 2012-2015.

<sup>23</sup> Etienne François et Thomas Serrier, *Europa, notre histoire. L'héritage européen depuis Homère*, Paris, Les Arènes, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Nora (dir.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984-1992, 7 vols. 2nd edition Paris, Gallimard, 1997, 3 vols, (Quarto).

important to whom in that debate?” It is interesting to me that this model has such a broad resonance almost everywhere. This shows that it responded to a need to symbolize one's own history in certain places and elements.

*But then it was translated into Japanese, to Korean ... In North America, 84% of the articles from the books *Lieux de mémoire* were translated and there is not a *lieux de mémoire* from the United States. Oh, there is, go to Gettysburg, go to...*

*No, a project, a great book...*

No, I say it is relatively contingent if someone feels the need to invent such a past. I would say there is such a strong American self-identification with a certain narrative of that history that you don't need the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, but you have it. Yes, you have it with the place where Martin Luther King was murdered. You have it with the Civil War battle places. You had it in the last two years with the debates about the statutes from colonialism that have to fall, etcetera. These are of course, *Lieux de mémoire*; if you call it like this or not, it doesn't matter. So, I would be interested not so much in what is a *lieux de mémoire* of the US but why at a certain point people talk about that one. I'm always trying to go at this second analytical level. What do we do with that history instead of saying: “this is the truth about history.”

*Tell me about your new project.*

Currently I have three projects that are interrelated publication projects. The first one is a series on the globalization projects we were talking about. I try to motivate people to co-author a twenty volumes history of globalization projects. This is not saying that we have only twenty in the world, but my aim is to show that there are at least twenty and that this will hopefully challenge the ideology of the one only globalization being identical with American or North American power projections. Fortunately, I have a series of like-minded colleagues to deal with this huge editorial task, with perhaps 20 authors per volume, so overall it's a crowd of 400 people. We have the first three volumes now in writing. One is about the French globalization project, the other one is about the globalization project of real socialism, from the Soviet Union to the Comecon.<sup>25</sup> And the third one is the globalization project of regional organizations, organizing the interaction of various states in a particular region. So how do they organize the world? Other volumes will follow about the US, about transnational companies, about cultural industries. The second larger project is that I was commissioned by Palgrave<sup>26</sup> to a Global

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<sup>25</sup> Comecon, also known as Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), was an organization established in January 1949 to facilitate and coordinate the economic development of the eastern European countries belonging to the Soviet bloc. Its original members were the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. Other members were Albania, the German Democratic Republic, the Mongolian People's Republic, Yugoslavia, Cuba, Vietnam. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comecon>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>26</sup> Palgrave Macmillan, publisher of books and journals <<https://www.palgrave.com/la>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].



history handbook which will contain like 300 articles, giving an overview of what the current state of global history is. It will be a living online resource where people can comment and criticize what has been written in the first instance as an article. It is a new way to deal with the progress of knowledge and methodology that is so fast in our field. The third one we discussed yesterday here at the CISH Congress in Poznan,<sup>27</sup> is a Global History of Humankind, and that is an echo of the UNESCO ambitions of the 1950s to write a history of mankind. Our idea is to write a history that takes into account the fact that humankind has not yet been a constituted actor in world history. Yes, of course, we have nations, we have companies, we have tribes, we have whatever gender. But humankind has been so far an assumption rather by philosophers, a reference in religion, a reference in art, but it is not yet a political reality. But for a few decades now we see it emerging in the streets with the climate movement, with antiwar movements etcetera. So, the one thing is to see the potential of that emerging humankind and to describe its history, because, to everything, there is a history. So, who invented this humankind? Who praised it in the past, etc. And the other story is to discuss the relationship between humankind and nature and how that makes us revise the established global history narratives, and to insist on one point that is really central, that's the importance of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>28</sup> It was in all accounts and narratives of global history so far, central in the sense of turning premodern into modern. The change of the energy basis of our societies has always been described as the most important shift. Now we see two elements. First, this energy supply is supposed to shift again, perhaps more slowly than we hoped for, but it is shifting from oil and gas and coal to something new. And secondly, we become more and more critical to the industrial revolution. So, David Christian,<sup>29</sup> one of the proponents of big history, said once that with the industrial revolution, they managed to burn in 200 years what was raised in 200,000,000 years. This is a story that can't be repeated neither by China, nor by India, nor by anyone else in the world. So the big issue here is how global history will look like under this condition that you can't simply follow the modernization path of England, Europe, the US, how our history has to look like when we work in the shifting energy supply system. And in the first run, this seems unrelated because people speak only about the future. We have to reach the 1.5-degree goal.<sup>30</sup> We have to reach this and

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<sup>27</sup> "A Global History of Humankind in the making", organized by Matthias Middell, Leipzig University, august 23, 2022 at the XXIII International Congress of Historical Sciences, CISH, Poznan, Poland, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> The Industrial Revolution was a period of major mechanization and innovation that began in Great Britain during the mid-18th century and early 19th century and later spread throughout much of the world. The British Industrial Revolution was dominated by the exploitation of coal and iron. James Chen, "Industrial Revolution Definition: History, Pros, and Cons", <<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/i/industrial-revolution.asp>> [Accessed: May 25, 2023].

<sup>29</sup> David Gilbert Christian (n. 1946), historian from the USA, promoter of the emerging discipline of Big History which frames human history in terms of cosmic, geological, and biological history. <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/christian-david-1946>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023]. His purpose is to make an account about the common history as humanity, not of this or that group, not of this or that era, but of all human beings from the origins to the present. <<https://apuntesfilosoficos.cl/david-christian-la-gran-historia/>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

<sup>30</sup> "The results of research in recent decades leave no doubt that the temperature on our planet is rising and that humankind is largely responsible for this. It has also become clear from studies of Earth's history that warming is proceeding very rapidly and could soon set in motion irreversible changes in the

that, but we will not reach that, I'm convinced, without reevaluating and consequently changing our narratives about the past. The famous success story of the Industrial Revolution has to be rewritten with its expensive outcome in terms of environmental costs involved, its fundamental unrepeatability with the consequences for narratives of modernity That's, in short, the challenge for that history, but to say it very honestly, we have not yet written a single line. We are in fact at the point where we discuss the theoretical framework, where we organize authors workshops and test interpretations. It will take us some time to produce such a new history. And if we will be successful, is an open question.

*OK. Thank you very much Matthias.*

It was a pleasure, as you can see these projects are horribly ambitious.

*Good projects are always ambitious. Not horribly, but ambitious.*

Transcription by Brenda Erandi Aguilar Mercado

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climate system, such as a complete melting of the Greenland ice sheet. Based on these research findings, climate scientists worldwide are urging action to limit global warming to 1.5 to a maximum of 2 degrees". <<https://www.geomar.de/en/discover/ocean-for-climate-protection/the-15-degree-goal#:~:text=The%201.5%20Degree%20Goal%20%2D%20From%20Knowledge%20to%20Action&text=Based%20on%20these%20research%20findings,a%20maximum%20of%202%20degrees>> [Accessed: august 5th 2023].

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