

# Methods in World History

## A Critical Approach

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# Contents

Globalization and world history	7
An introduction to studies of methods	
<i>Arne Jarrick, Janken Myrdal &amp; Maria Wallenberg Bondesson</i>	
1. Historians, superhistory, and climate change	19
<i>J.R. McNeill</i>	
2. On source criticism in world history	45
<i>Janken Myrdal</i>	
3. Four myths in global agrarian history	85
<i>Mats Widgren</i>	
4. Archaeological investigations, interpretations, and theories	107
The cases of Sri Lanka and Sweden compared	
<i>Eva Myrdal</i>	
5. What can be understood, compared, and counted as context?	147
Studying lawmaking in world history	
<i>Arne Jarrick &amp; Maria Wallenberg Bondesson</i>	
6. Core and periphery in the early modern world system	185
A time-space appropriation assessment	
<i>Rikard Warlenius</i>	
7. National accounts in world history	227
Methodological problems and possible solutions	
<i>Rodney Edvinsson</i>	
Index	251

# Globalization and world history

## An introduction to studies of methods

*Arne Jarrick, Janken Myrdal & Maria Wallenberg Bondesson*

### Globalization – a long-term process

Globalization may be considered a process in which the network of human interaction gradually widens and takes on new and more complex forms. We would venture to say that each step of these deeper and more inclusive interconnections has unique characteristics. For instance, during the time of the great empires at the beginning of the Common Era (CE), the flow of materials and intellectual influences reached a higher level than ever before. Another important step was taken in the sixteenth century, involving the merging of the two worlds, America and Afro-Eurasia. These steps presented new challenges to populations all over the world, in the spiritual sense no less than in the material sense. Such challenges permeated the encounters between people and peoples who previously never met, and who found one another alien and perhaps even less than human. And those people, confronted with completely new geophysical circumstances, carried with them disease, which would prove yet another fateful challenge.

Globalization can neither be understood as a consciously intended process, nor as the irreversible goal or end-point of history. It is not the final outcome of some ancient master plan. Likewise, from our vantage point we cannot be sure that the worldwide web of human encounters will never fall apart, destroyed by, for example, pandemics, devastating wars, climate collapse, or something else that we cannot even envision. However, the fact that globalization has most often evolved as the unintended consequence of intended action has not prevented it from having a certain direction as it drives the ever-increasing connectedness of people around the world.

Obviously, globalization has not been the same throughout history. It has appeared in different guises at different periods in time. What are the distinguishing features of our own age of globalization, then? Trade? No, the late nineteenth century saw the establishment of bulk trade with steamers and railways, a much more pervasive change in trade than we see today. Migration? Only if we talk about shorter translocations – if we are talking about mass migrations then other periods are far more important. But there is one specific feature that is uniquely contemporary: the immediate and worldwide transfer of information. That has never happened before: what does it imply for globalization?

Globalization is multifaceted, permeating almost all aspects of human life, from the production of material objects to the production of ideas, from social conflict to ideational clashes. Ideas have spread worldwide, so that similar and fundamental concerns have seeped into people's minds, whether explicitly discussed or not. Indeed, today we are witnessing a rapid convergence in what people around the world are discussing, not just geographically but also temporally, be it a truly worldwide conversation in the global agora or a series of local exchanges resembling each other.

Of course, even in our time, there are a wide variety of issues, dealt with separately in the different regions and nations of the world, but they are increasingly converging into a more limited number of core issues of common concern to all humankind. Worldwide access to modern Internet media is the technological motor of this change, together with computerization, which leads to a similarity in intellectual tools and approaches all over the world. However, aside from the opportunities provided by new and fast-expanding technologies, there is also a societal and environmental base for the heated arguments found in almost all corners of the world. Democracy, women's rights, environmental problems, and not least comparisons between cultures: for good reasons, these issues worry us wherever we happen to live, as they are the basis for sustaining our lives and societies, and require globally agreed solutions.

For instance, patriarchs in Central Asia and feminists in New York are not only equally preoccupied with gender issues, but also

largely familiar with one another's discourses to which they also react, so that advances in women's rights in one place may trigger a conservative, patriarchal reaction in another. Environmental issues are linked to questions of power and responsibility not only between nations, but between continents, in a continuation of a centuries-long trend towards increased rights for previously repressed groups being offset by counter-reactions from individuals and groups who see their power diminishing.

Self-evidently, this intense global discussion does not necessarily mean that we are witnessing an increasingly unified culture. Quite the contrary, we are rather experiencing the continued competition between world religions and ideologies, and the strengthening of some aspects of regional cultures, perhaps in reaction to the pressure applied by globalization. However, those religions, ideologies and regional cultures increasingly revolve around common core issues.

It is precisely here that world historians come in. Indeed, the growing field of world history research is itself part and parcel of that globally converging agenda. And in every discussion that is relevant for the future direction of humankind, in every discussion with ideological connotations and implications, history plays a role. History is the storage chamber from which arguments are fetched, whether complete myths or solid facts. Potentially, this gives the writing of world history a specific and crucial role as globalization unfolds. For this reason it is reassuring that a globalizing trend is clearly discernible in current historical research.

## World historians

It is clear that the scientific tide has turned many times before, and historical research is no exception. Thus it is no surprise that over the last two millennia there have been a number of synthesizing waves, when intellectuals from different schools have made attempts at formulating grand, general ideas about the forces and destiny of world history. From earlier periods we might mention Ssu-Ma-Chien or Ibn Khaldun, from recent history Karl Marx and Max Weber (for an overview and a number of presentations

of world historians, see Galtung & Inayatullah 1997), and more recently Immanuel Wallerstein, Jared Diamond and David Christian (Wallerstein 1974–1989; Diamond 1997; Christian 2004). Today we see world history studies evolving into a movement, a genre in its own right, with specific journals, international conferences, and increasing numbers of scholars leading the way (Collins 1999; Bentley 2011).

On the surface, the current boom in world history studies resembles a similar boom in national history in the nineteenth century. In every country, new journals and associations were founded and large groups of historians published on national history in monographs and textbooks. But the similarity goes deeper than that. Generally speaking, the peoples of Europe and their politicians in the nineteenth century embraced nationalism. Thus, from the nineteenth century onwards, professional historians were “drafted” into the nationalist project of providing their nation-states with a glorious past. This, said in passing, has been repeated in nationalist and sometimes anti-colonial historiography in other parts of the world since the Second World War. Since nationalism was an all-embracing ideology, nationalistic inclinations often harmonized with the attitudes of the historians. However, gradually some of them became annoyed by the lack of scientific distance to certain of these myths, and took steps to professionalize and at the same time improve historical research. As professionals they reacted against the role that history was supposed to play in the formation of national self-awareness – the forming of nations as collective units.

Citizens were taught that they had a shared history, a kind of unifying experience. It was normally charged with pride at being a citizen of the nation to which they belonged. We are all aware of the fact that the development of national self-awareness can have disastrous results. After all much of the ideological basis of German expansionism was to be found in how history was written. At the same time, history as a discipline became more and more professionalized. History was one of the core subjects at the universities, and when the humanities underwent a profound methodological transformation – the introduction of detailed and critical description – history was in the front line.

Source criticism developed into a key method, with certain criteria for how the double-checking of primary sources should be implemented. Plain forgery was the first to be weeded out, with the help of indicators such as writing style, age of paper and deletions. Another criterion was proximity to event and place. The nearer in time and space, the greater the credibility of the information gained. A most important check was purpose. Every source created by human beings embodies an intention. Most often, those who produce the source (whether written, painted or created by other means) want to portray themselves in a good light (when describing a war, for instance), or to gain some advantage (in a conflict over property, say). Source criticism could be used as a powerful weapon against exaggerated national self-esteem, with its counterpart in today's sensitivity to Eurocentrism and other self-blind biases. Source criticism certainly does not offer complete protection, however. Thus the country where the method was first developed, Germany, was also the country where national pride, or even "race pride" based on counterfeit historiography, took on horrific proportions, with the most disastrous effects. The Nazis had strong popular support, largely thanks to historical mythmaking.

This process can be described as bi-directional. Thus professionalization, inspired by nation-building, could *also* provide the tools by which the myths and misinterpretations in nation-building historiography could be undermined. Professionalization, in the sense that scientific methods are developed, is potentially a self-healing process during which facts will be established under increasingly intense scrutiny, reviewed by peers, while the individual scholar simultaneously exerts self-control when interpreting sources.

### Improving methods

What is the lesson to be learnt from this? Historians have a responsibility for their presentation of knowledge of the past, but also for trying to avoid undesirable use of their findings. One important way to minimize the risk of abuses of historical knowledge is to expose the results to stringent tests, as well as to gather and systematize knowledge with a mind as "clinically" detached as possible.

An essential step is to open up a thorough discussion of what the production of historical knowledge can and should imply for us in the methodological sense. However, to date such methodological issues have seldom been discussed. For example, the just-published *A Companion to World History* (Northrop 2015) has over thirty interesting chapters, but almost none of them are occupied with critical methodological perspectives (for the one rare exception, see Adas in Northrop 2015). The present volume is thus an attempt to redress this sort of relative deficiency.

Today's world historians need to reflect systematically on the methods they apply in order to improve and develop their craft. We are fully aware that this brings to mind a wide variety of issues, of which only a small number and specific perspectives will be particularly addressed in this volume. Our take on the matter is as distinctively or narrowly methodological as the overarching questions are quite simple. The first question concerns how to gather information; the second, how to make sure that the information gathered and utilized is reasonably reliable. The questions are operationalized into a number of different issues, all aiming at the improvement of the craft of world history. They range from an encouragement to utilize new, non-textual sources, through calls to improve source criticism using systematic examination of secondary sources and the different degrees of resolution of data to be compared, to methods for improving our ability to understand and compare seemingly unintelligible sources divided by wide cultural distances, and, finally, to methods for measuring long-term economic relations between countries and regions.

For quite a few global historians, the major methodological mission is different from ours. It is to find ways to resist ideological tendencies and temptations – varieties of Eurocentrism being seemingly the most important and pressing one. Quite frequently, Western historians have accused other – mainly Western – historians of treating Europe as a model for the rest of the world. This criticism appears in two guises: as an accusation of diffusionist bias or as what could be called a topical bias. The former type of criticism has been frequently repeated since at least the end of the Second World War and is well known to all who are familiar with global

or world history. Ironically as it might seem, the latter criticism has been evoked by attempts to respond constructively to the first type of criticism. As a response to charges of naïve diffusionism, historians have taken pains to show that certain social, institutional and economic processes, such as advanced trade networks, were established in many parts of the world independently, prior to corresponding processes in Europe, instead of being spread to peripheries from a Western center of origin (for example, Abu-Lughod 1993; Lieberman 2009). In turn, the critical repercussion has been that it is now regarded as Eurocentric to identify essential aspects of societal development with processes once thought as Western or European, although perceived as evolving independently of the West itself. Why focus on phenomena so closely linked to the development of Western capitalism, whether developed independently or not (Conrad 2013)?

One may wonder if it is possible to imagine any approach that would not be viewed as Eurocentric – one way or another. Certainly, it is always important to cultivate a sensitivity to one's own potential biases. And obviously, historians have had a tendency to present their own region as the bearer of specific and perhaps superior qualities. This is clearly a problem that must be addressed by all world historians with an ambition to provide critical and comparative analyses. Yet, the rejoinder may be a case of over-sensitivity, prompting anxious scholars to circumvent all kinds of globally oriented historical comparisons.

Equally, it is far-fetched to consider the use of certain concepts and theories as Eurocentric simply because they originated in Europe. It would be as strange to regard certain concepts as "Afrocentric" only because they were invented somewhere in Africa. This is to conflate narrow-minded part-blindness with the universal character and usefulness of certain analytical tools and theories offered to everyone wherever they happen to live.

Another danger, especially to historians, is politically or commercially driven expectations to present a distorted picture of long-term environmental change. This might be disastrous for our chances of solving future problems. Similarly, if certain idiosyncrasies concerning women in patriarchal cultures are to decide how women's

contribution to human intellectual and material culture is to be described, this could hamper the process of women winning more rights, not just for decades but for centuries to come.

### This volume

Biases such as these constitute a threat to societally relevant research. Being of profound importance to science and society, these issues also feature large in this volume. This includes a deliberate suspicion of one's own non-scientific idiosyncrasies as much as of other scholars'. In other words, to us it is obvious that criticism of ideology-driven research in itself has to be as non-ideological as possible in order to be, and thus appear, reliable. Indeed, double-directed awareness of this kind is evident in much of this volume, especially in Janken Myrdal's plea for better historical source criticism, Mats Widgren's criticism of the myths of agrarian development in the world, Eva Myrdal's discussion of the data asymmetry between Sweden and Sri Lanka, and Rikard Warlenius' diligent attempt to measure value and exchange relations in a non-Eurocentric manner.

However, although present in most of the chapters, critique of ideology is not at the core of our methodological approach to world history. The same applies to theoretical and conceptual issues, despite the irrefutable fact that they likewise are relevant to matters of method.

As said, our overarching ambition is more limited. But even with a limited ambition it is beyond our reach to exhaust the issue. A great many other questions could have been included. Yet, since we see this as a starting point for a new way of approaching methodological problems in world history, we expect other scholars to join in and supply what is missing here.

Historical research has normally been based on textual sources, and it still is, a fact which is reflected in most of the chapters in this volume. This is unfortunate. Historians should be ready to approach any aspect of the past that could be of potential use for of any kind of information that helps in tracing bygone processes leading up to the present – be it a text, a physical object or a chemical process. This is precisely the issue at stake in John McNeill's contribution. McNeill mentions additional historical sources such as tree rings, ice cores,

mineral deposits in caves, fossil pollen, marine corals, et cetera. He states that the increasing interest in such sources is due to a “new surge of research into climate history”, in its turn reflecting concerns about the presently ongoing potentially devastating change in the climatic conditions for human life. If historians continue sticking to their age-old textual tradition, they will gradually become marginalized, miss out on crucial debates, and much needed historical knowledge will never be produced. Acquiring new methods is, however, not an easy task which is why historians, according to McNeill, may wish to collaborate with microbiologists, geneticists, chemists, and other experts on methods that so far have been rather alien to the historical sciences.

However, despite the coming sea change in the informational conditions for historical research – McNeill calls it a revolution – historians are still preoccupied with textual sources. This is also why the discussions in this volume mainly address the problems of tackling textual remains from the past. Our take on the matter is positive as well as negative, welcoming the huge potential of text-based comparative research, yet also warning against too sanguine an attitude to the problems intrinsically tied to it.

In his plea for sharpened source criticism, Janken Myrdal recommends that historians check up on a few indicators that are globally represented. Such studies could be based on a combination of sources, primary, secondary (literature), and tertiary (literature referring to other literature). Any such combination may result in new and solid knowledge, as long as the study is arranged so as to make it sincerely possible to refute its results. With the aid of empirical examples from his own research Myrdal then addresses a pair of essential methodological problems which he then applies to the testing of the so-called axial age theory.

Myrdal touches upon the problem that world history to a substantial degree has to be based on secondary or even tertiary sources. But he leaves a closer treatment of the issue to Mats Widgren. Widgren is presently engaged in a project to summarize and assess existing knowledge of global agrarian systems in the last millennium. In this project, the researchers have had to rely heavily on secondary sources. Here, they have been struck by how often scholars ignore empirically tested generalizations for untested “commonly accepted

assumptions". Widgren devotes his chapter to a critical discussion of four myths based on such assumptions: the myth of empty land in areas that were actually populated and used in different ways; the myth that current foraging systems are representative of their assumed counterparts in prehistory; the myth of agrarian inertia in the past; and the myth of environmental determinism. Along with his critical discussion of these myths, Widgren suggests how best to distinguish between reliable and unreliable secondary sources.

Like Janken Myrdal and Mats Widgren, Eva Myrdal addresses some of the problems with sources. Her particular aim is to raise warnings against a reliance on comparisons between regions or countries where data are really not on par due to their different degrees of resolution. She illustrates the general problem by charting how to achieve comparability of certain aspects of the long-term economic development of Sweden and Sri Lanka. The ultimate goal is to overcome such imbalances and thus establish a more solid ground for globally oriented comparative research.

All these chapters address a series of methodological shortcomings in the field of world history research. In contrast, Arne Jarrick's and Maria Wallenberg Bondesson's purpose is instead to argue that the methodological obstacles are not as non-negotiable as is often claimed and lamented. With a number of examples from their ongoing comparative research into the long-term history of law-making worldwide, Jarrick and Wallenberg Bondesson show that it is indeed possible to make intelligible – and so comparable and contextualized – texts from cultures at huge temporal and geographical distances from one another. Basing their research on primary sources, they also give an outline of the particular tools needed to come to grips with tough but nonetheless digestible matter of this kind.

Continuing the theme of comparisons, both of the two concluding chapters deal with different aspects of comparative economic history. Drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein's world system theory and ecological economics, Rikard Warlenius takes a structural-ecological approach to shed some light on the long-standing dispute over whether the early modern world economy centered on Europe or China. The case of the eighteenth-century tea and iron trade between Sweden and China is the subject of Warlenius' analysis, which he

carries out using time-space appropriation (TSA), in which the land and labor embodied in the commodities exchanged are calculated and compared. Since prices are considered highly cultural, and are not simply an outcome of supply and demand, this approach lays bare the power relations beneath what on the surface looks like equal exchanges. Warlenius demonstrates how to use the method, developed at the Human Ecology Department at Lund, making it possible for others to apply.

Like the other contributors to this volume, Rodney Edvinsson combines the identification of a methodological problem with suggestions of how to find a solution to it; in this case, how to estimate the long-term development of the GDP of different countries in order to make them reasonably comparable. Such work could be immensely time-consuming, and the challenge is how to find a shortcut which, being good enough, could become widely accepted – and far more valid than Angus Maddison’s heavily criticized “time series” which spans the entire era from 1 CE to the present. After addressing a number of potential pitfalls, Edvinsson ends by proposing what he calls the expenditure approach.

In conclusion, the intention of this volume is to serve as a starting point for constructive developments in the field of global history research. We are well aware that there are many more methodological issues that need to be addressed than those discussed here, and our aim is to mark a baseline for this most vital discussion about world history.

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# Historians, superhistory, and climate change

*J.R. McNeill*

That we are now in an age of rapid climate change is disputed in only a few places, and there mainly for political purposes. Concern over what changing climate might mean has motivated a surge of research into climate history, using all manner of proxy evidence to inquire into temperature conditions, droughts and floods, the frequency of hurricanes and other major storms, El Niño events, and much else besides.

Only a small proportion of this new evidence on climate history comes from textual sources, the familiar terrain of the historian. Instead it comes from tree rings, ice cores, speleothems (mineral deposits in caves), fossil pollen, marine corals, varves (layers of silt or clay on the seafloor) among other places. Climate history is undergoing a renaissance thanks to all these new data. At the same time, as I will explain below, new evidence of other sorts, pertaining to other sorts of history, is also cascading forth.

Fifty or sixty years ago, under the influence of Fernand Braudel and his friends, professional history took a turn toward the social sciences. Thirty years ago, under the influence of other French scholars, no friends of Braudel, professional history took a “linguistic turn”. Now it looks to be taking a “natural science turn”. Historians seem to be rather like windmills, turning this way and that in response to the prevailing winds of other intellectual disciplines. There is nothing wrong with that. Surely it is often preferable to adjust one’s research methods in response to innovations, whether they come from physics or from literary studies, rather than to remain resolutely unaffected by changes in intellectual life.

In this chapter, I will try to explain some of the opportunities and challenges presented by the volcano-like eruption of new historical data from the natural sciences, with special attention to climate data and what some prominent historians have thought about climate. I will also raise the question of how the new data might affect the choices historians make about the scales on which they pursue their research, in particular the logic of selecting a global scale.

### Superhistory and why historians need to overcome the text fetish

The past, always a foreign country, is growing more foreign to text-based historians.

If historians wish to improve their – our – ability to address puzzles from the past (and for that matter to remain central in the study of history), they – we – need to embrace what is fast becoming superhistory. Superhistory amounts to a methodological revolution by which textual evidence jostles together with that of ice cores, marine sediments, peat bogs, stable isotopic ratios, and the human genome – and a few other genomes as well. The revolution takes historians to new terrain, to geo-archives and bio-archives, as well as to the more familiar archives containing old documents. Climate history is part of this revolution, so far perhaps the biggest part.

While careful analysis of documentary texts is the bread and butter of the historical method, historians for at least a century have found ways to use other sources such as art, literature, and the findings of archeologists. For those times and places at which abundant texts, art, and archeology overlap, such as the Roman Mediterranean of the first and second centuries CE, the interplay among specialists using different sorts of sources is a long tradition and a fruitful one. Such melding of sources has yielded information and insights rarely matched for times and places with fewer texts, less surviving art, or low appeal to archeologists. So superhistory has its precedents, and perhaps should be regarded as an expansion upon a methodological tradition (Myrdal 2012).

Superhistory nudges us, and perhaps drives us, in the direction of global history. Texts come in languages, and those languages some-