

## The Importance of Global History

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**“What is the use of history?”, Serge Gruzinski answers the question with a plea for global history as an antidote to methodological nationalism and a self-complacent Eurocentrism. Global history offers another perspective on globalisation.**

Reviewed: Serge Gruzinski, *L’histoire, pour quoi faire ?*, Paris, Fayard, 2015. 300 p., 18 €.

In the foreword to his book, French historian Serge Gruzinski explains how he found himself going back to his hometown, the cosmopolitan working-class city of Roubaix, where he was invited by a teacher of history and geography to meet students and answer their questions about one of the topics in the curriculum for history (year 11/tenth grade) – *New Geographical and Cultural Horizons of Europeans in Modern Times* – Gruzinski being one of the best specialists on the topic. The students had read his book, *The Eagle and the Dragon* (2012, 2014 for the English version), in an attempt to apprehend the various situations – encounters, exchanges and misunderstandings – that occurred during the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards and a failed Portuguese expedition to China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This approach enabled the students to adopt a decentred perspective on history and keep off the beaten tracks of “a self-complacent Eurocentrism”(p. 14).

In the course of the discussion, a simple but essential question arose, which would be provocative were it not ingenuous: “What is the use of history?”. This question, which challenges both the practice and the discipline of history, echoes the question Marc Bloch recalls at the beginning of his famous book, *The Historian’s Craft (Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien, 1949)* – “Tell me, Daddy. What is the use of history?” – hoping the book would provide an answer.

In his attempt to answer the question, Serge Gruzinski chose to write in a way that would make his essay accessible to readers beyond a narrow circle of specialists. The book reads easily and follows a pedagogical approach: it is composed of eight short chapters and an epilogue. The first four chapters question the various representations of the past in our contemporary globalized society, while in the light of past practices the next four set out the *raison d’être* of history. The answer assumes the shape of a plea for global history, which is the only form of history that makes possible a comprehensive understanding of the world as it is and as such that has any relevance.

### **Political and artistic usages of the past**

In the first chapters, Serge Gruzinski successively refers to dancing, photography, the cinema, the opera, manga or videogames in order to think the relation of present times to the past. The photography by Kader Attia, a contemporary artist, on the cover of the French

edition, provides the first example of the complexity of our relation to the past: the picture shows young teenagers playing football on dry and stony ground in the Aurès in Algeria. In the background, we can see a boy, arms dangling by his sides, standing under a rather heavily damaged Roman arch serving as goal: “Being a forsaken relic of a bygone past, it has been recycled into a sport that has become one of the most glorious, sensational and profitable aspects of globalisation” (p. 20, French version).

This is the starting-point of a comprehensive reflection on the remains of the past and on our relation to it on a day-to-day basis. Through the analysis of a few televised as well as cinematographic dramatizations of history, such as the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games in London and Beijing, or the endless succession of commemorations, or the creation of large museums like the Musée du Quai Branly, Serge Gruzinski presents a very critical picture of historiographical practices: “Inability to tackle local issues, blunders, mental blocks or deliberate ignorance of alien issues are evidence that in the hands of politicians and large public institutions, history can hardly encompass the multiple facets of a globalized world” (p. 44).

With a large number of different vehicles – television, the cinema, computers or smartphones – images have an invasive power that challenges the place of the written word in accounting for the past: “The flows of images that swamp the planet have not superseded the written word yet, but they definitely undermine the age-old relationship that existed in some parts of the world between writing and history”. (p. 63) This sad conclusion does not result from any feelings of contempt or rejection regarding images, nor is it inspired by a contempt for globalised cultural practices which, despite using and abusing of the past, stifle the voices of historians. Indeed, the author points out how some works of art are likely to open up new perspectives for historians.

As a specialist of images and a knowledgeable cinema lover, Serge Gruzinski gives a fine analysis of the dramatization of history in the films of Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov. In particular, he focuses on the subjective reconstruction of the past in Sokurov’s filmic oddity of 2001, *Russian Ark*, shot in a single continuous 90-minute take inside the Hermitage museum in St-Petersburg. The film challenges our relation to history through temporal editing and an assumed betrayal of history; indeed, Sokurov used his imagination to compensate for gaps in our memory of the past, which a historian could never allow himself to do in the absence of archives. Such a dramatization of history nevertheless opens up new perspectives for historians.

Taking into account both the growing influence of images and the multiplication of virtual worlds, Serge Gruzinski gives a new formulation to the question posed by the Roubaix students: “What is the point of doing history in such conditions?” (p. 94)

### **A plea for global history**

The global history approach thus appears to provide the best answer to the question posed by the Roubaix students in so far as it is the only one in which “the pasts of our planet can enter in a dialogue with its presents” (p. 96). However, it needs to be defined, which Serge Gruzinski does by giving a brief and illuminating essay on global history, obviously drawing on his long-term reflections on the topic:

Privileging a global perspective means focusing not only on the relations societies build up with one another and on the way they are articulated to one another, forming a variety of

different groups, but also on the way these human, economic, social, religious or political arrangements either enhance the homogeneity of the planet or, on the contrary, resist it. (p. 96)

This perspective makes it possible to avoid the kinds of impasses methodological nationalism leads to and resist the temptation of Eurocentrism. The global approach does not exclude a local approach as long as the local scale is not conceived of as a circumscribed and self-contained space but as “a privileged area playing the role of an interface between the local scale and a much wider environment” (p. 112).

Serge Gruzinski illustrates his theoretical postulate with examples from a familiar topic of his: the 16<sup>th</sup> century; indeed, “the multiple zones of contact, of confrontation, of exchanges that developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century lend themselves particularly well to global history” (p. 122). According to the author, the entanglement of societies that followed the great Spanish maritime expeditions constitutes the first stage in the process of globalisation. In so far as it is the only form of history that is able to take global aspects into account, global history appears to be the most reliable tool for understanding our globalized world as it is.

Obviously, the phenomenon is complex and cannot be reduced to a mere imposition of European domination over other parts of the world. The process of westernization, which is “a projection of the Old World outside its own boundaries” (p. 158) does not consist of a two-way relationship between dominant and dominated cultures. In previous books, Serge Gruzinski used the concepts of intermixing and crossbreeding in order to account for the inequitable encounter between the Spaniards and the American “Indians” and develop the plural and complex history of these “American laboratories” of globalisation.

### **The salvation of history?**

In the epilogue, entitled “What type of history should we teach?”, Serge Gruzinski renews his invitation to open up the field of his discipline so that historians may remain in close contact with the world as it is, and avoid “becoming prisoners of a conventional academicism resulting in theirs constantly losing ground”. Historians can still hope to reach an audience beyond the academy on condition that their practice of history be based on a dialogue with other forms of writing about the past (artistic, cinematographic, etc.) and that it takes the full measure of the global dimension of its objects of study.

The reader will undoubtedly understand the necessity of pushing back the boundaries of the discipline. As a matter of fact, this reflection on writing history builds upon other stimulating reflections on the “historian’s craft” – as evidenced by the recent interest in the relationship between history and literature while the popularity of historical fiction challenges the way history is written.<sup>1</sup>

In his own way, Serge Gruzinski seeks to boost a field of study that has been impaired by the race for “excellence”, by disciplinary logics that are often sterilising, and by an increasing specialisation of the research scholars, which tends to isolate them from the world around them<sup>2</sup>. One may nevertheless regret the lack of nuance in this bleak enough portrait of

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<sup>1</sup> See Patrick Boucheron, « "Toute littérature est assaut contre la frontière". Note sur les embarras historiens d'une rentrée littéraire », *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, 2010/2, pp. 441-467 ; and Ivan Jablonka, *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales*, Paris, Seuil, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Portuguese historian Diogo Ramada Curto recently published an essay in which he challenged the *raison d'être* of the historiographical field and expressed similar pessimistic views on the state of the discipline in his country. However, he claims the responsibility lies first and foremost with the government, who fails to finance research

the historiographical practice<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, the global dimension of history has definitely been integrated into school curricula – however imperfect these may be in other respects – which reflects the “global turn” in a historiographical field whose scope goes far beyond the entangled worlds of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Although history as a discipline and an academic subject can be ponderous, the “plea for a global history” (to paraphrase Marc Bloch) is undeniably part of a more general renewal of historiography, in which history is apprehended as being connected and transnational, and whose present and future results allow for new approaches to understanding the history of our globalized societies.

### Further reading

Bertrand (Romain), « Histoire globale, histoires connectées : un "tournant" historiographique ? », in A. Caillé et S. Dufoix (dir.), *Le "tournant global" des sciences sociales*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013, p. 44-66.

Bloch (Marc), *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1949.

Boucheron (Patrick) et Delalande (Nicolas), *Pour une histoire-monde*, Paris, Puf-La Vie des idées, 2013.

Gruzinski (Serge), *La pensée métisse*, Paris, Fayard, 1999 (rééd. Pluriel, 2012).

-, *L'Aigle et le dragon. Démesure européenne et mondialisation au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 2012.

-, *Quelle heure est-il là-bas ? Amérique et Islam à l'orée des Temps modernes*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

Jablonka (Ivan), dossier « Les formes de la recherche » sur *La Vie des Idées* : <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Les-formes-de-la-recherche.html>

Ramada Curto (Diogo), *Para que serve a história ? [À quoi sert l'histoire ?]*, Lisbonne, Tinta da China, 2013.

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programmes adequately and secondly, with the social scientists themselves, who totally fail to maintain a dialogue among the various specialists in the field.

<sup>3</sup> As early as 2011, Serge Gruzinski expressed regret at the fact France had failed to “embrace *world history*”. Serge Gruzinski, « Faire de l'histoire dans un monde globalisé », *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, 2011/4, p. 1087.