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Perspectives on History

The Newsmagazine of the *American Historical Association*

Doctoral Training in World History: The Northeastern University Experience

Patrick Manning, March 1999

In an April 1992 article in *Perspectives*, I described a proposed PhD program focusing on world history.¹ Seven years later, I am able to report that the program is in place, has 17 doctoral candidates (including 11 working on dissertations), and that as many as 3 will complete their degrees this year. These students are comfortable in area studies literatures and discourse, but approach their problems globally. The Northeastern University program, while modest in size by comparison to established doctoral programs, appears already to have gathered the largest concentration of doctoral students in world history. A description of this program provides an occasion to ask what role doctoral programs in world history might have in the future of the historical profession.

Research in World History

As a teaching field, world history has grown dramatically during the last two decades. World history is now one of the principal high school courses in history, along with U.S. history. At community college and university levels, world history

courses and textbooks equal in number those of Western civilization. Still, the approach of most textbooks and courses in world history, though intended to be global, relies heavily on the national and area studies traditions in which the teachers and authors were trained. To interpret world history as a string of regional histories is one logical approach, but it is not the only one.

Research in global history has also expanded during the past generation. Global historians, in constructing a field where there was none, have created an impressive body of scholarship, and have extended their audience from the *Journal of World History* to their share of articles in the *American Historical Review*. The level of research, however, has lagged far behind the demands of teaching, and the contribution of doctoral dissertations to that research has been negligible. Research in world history has developed incrementally through the contributions of individual scholars, mostly at senior levels, working on their own.

Aside from these individuals, the leading historians and their institutions have been content to stick with the inherited national and civilizational frameworks in interpreting the past. They have implicitly joined with the globalization theorists to assume that global social phenomena are a characteristic of the present and not the past. In this still-dominant view, the rise of agriculture, the iron age, organized religion, planet-wide maritime contact, industrialization, and democratic aspirations are appropriately analyzed as local, and not as global, phenomena.²

The thin line of senior scholars who have taken up world history, working in their second academic language for the last 20 years of a career, are perhaps not the best-chosen group for breaking through the limits of national and civilizational paradigms. It is our view that younger scholars, whose first academic language is global and who may have up to 40 years to enunciate interpretations in its terms, could do more to develop a planetary approach to our past.

The formal training of world historians, however, has grown at a very slow rate. The expansion of training in world history has been achieved with almost no organized or consistent investment in research. Efforts at concentrated study in world history from the 1950s into the 1970s, at Chicago, Northwestern, and Wisconsin, were not sustained. In the 1980s graduate study in world history began again, notably with the work of Philip Curtin at Johns Hopkins, Jerry Bentley at Hawaii, and Carter Findley at Ohio State. Investment in global programs remained minimal. The 1996 grant of \$690,000 by the Annenberg/CPB Project to Northeastern for developing the *Migration in Modern World History* CD-ROM may be the largest grant for world history, but it is far below the amount necessary to launch research in the field.

The work to be taken on by doctoral programs in world history may be identified at three levels. First is to produce teachers of world history and professors who will train teachers. Second is to address the many issues in transnational and transregional history that now appear on the historical agenda—issues in global environmental and economic history, but also in social and cultural interactions. The third level is to develop a historical perspective on the current reconceptualization of the world. Two centuries ago, scholars elaborated a new world view through a vision of progress and evolution, structured by notions of separate nations, races, and continents. Today we witness the emergence of a systemic conceptualization of the world, emphasizing interconnections among phenomena previously considered as discrete. The task of historians, in this effort, is to explore the record of global connections in the past.

The Northeastern University Program

Northeastern University's doctoral program admitted its first students in September 1994. Creating a new program provided a chance to take a fresh look at doctoral study in history. Our faculty's consensus in favor of a focus on world history has been central in getting the program through various challenges.³ After a few years of development, the program has these general emphases:

- Focus on world history with courses, bibliography, exams, and dissertations on the various aspects of world history.
- Reliance on the program's linkage to the World History Center. This center, focusing on research, curriculum development, and institutional development in world history, has provided substantial support and practical applications for doctoral students.
- Substantial focus on historical methodology—the analytical skills of historians, and theories and methods of disciplines on which history draws.
- Articulation of global historical study with strong area studies training in the regions of each student's choice, including history of the United States and of European countries.
- Exploration of the variety of approaches to world history—comparative, interactive, and synthetic.

Northeastern's medium-sized department is relatively well balanced by region and specialization. Of the fourteen full-time faculty members regularly teaching in the department, six are trained in U.S. history, four in European history, and four in history of other areas. Of the U.S. historians, two faculty members direct three doctoral students, two of the four trained in European history direct four doctoral

students, and the four trained in history of other areas direct eleven doctoral students.

We have admitted from three to seven doctoral students per year. Two came to us with BA degrees; two more entered the doctoral program after completing MA degrees at Northeastern, and thirteen came to us with MA degrees from other institutions. Two students are from outside the United States (both from China). Three of our students received previous degrees from Ivy League institutions, three completed degrees at other private institutions in the northeast, and eight obtained degrees from public institutions from Maine to Wisconsin to Texas.

The doctoral students take courses along with MA and MAT candidates, of whom a growing proportion focus on world history. The department offers six to eight graduate classes per term on a quarter system; students take two or sometimes three courses per term. Doctoral students take a course in global historiography, as well as introductory and advanced courses in methodology, and at least two of the seminars we offer are on global political, social, and cultural history. "Approaches to World History" is a one-quarter survey of world history, of particular interest to students in our MAT program, but also taken by doctoral students. Courses such as "Gender and Colonialism," "The African Diaspora," and "The Early Modern Atlantic" are inherently global; courses in environmental history and urban history, taught by U.S. specialists, have become significantly global in reach. A course on borderlands, rather than on the Soviet Union, emphasizes regional linkages. Even explicitly regional courses, as on the Caribbean and modern China, include global dimensions.

Doctoral students select a major professor immediately and a committee of three as soon as possible. One committee member may be from outside the department or outside the university. In deliberations with the committee, the student sets a program for language study, for methodological specialization (which should consist of three courses), a dissertation topic, and prepares for the comprehensive exams. Candidates are required to take a teaching tutorial, a mentored practicum, and then to teach their own courses.

Students take three comprehensive exams, two written and one oral. One of the exams is on world history—for this exam, the student must address a significant portion of the literature summarized in the departmental bibliography on world history. A second exam focuses on the candidate's regional specialization and the third focuses on the candidate's methodological and thematic specialization. The dissertation proposal must be approved before the candidate takes comprehensive exams.

The dissertation is the crucial element of the program. It is commonly argued that

students should begin with a localized study before taking on a broad study. In contrast, we argue that our students' formative book-length research should be with a global study, so that for the balance of their career they can advance their insights within that framework, rather than begin global work only after they have left graduate school. Dissertation projects in process indicate the range of topics and approaches of students in the program: comparative studies—women in bus boycotts in Montgomery and Johannesburg and the cultural revolution in China and the revolutionary offensive in Cuba; localized studies in global context—a letter-writing family in late 18th-century Massachusetts, communalism in 19th-century South India, and a French-Canadian parish in Massachusetts; broadly systemic studies—20th-century decolonization, Latin American migration in the 20th century, and opinion management in the mid-20th century; intellectual biography—Owen Lattimore and his interpretation of world history; and curriculum development—creating thematic curricula for high school and college courses.

The World History Center

The World History Center is designed as a comprehensive center for research, curriculum development, and for strengthening the institutions of world history. The center has had significant success in gathering resources and assembling an active node of scholarly discourse, even now that hope is gone for gaining federal support for a world history equivalent to the area studies centers set up in the cold war era. The center's funding has come from multimedia projects, from professional development work for teachers of world history, and from research grants awarded to associates of the center.

The World History Seminar supports about 14 presentations a year by visiting scholars, Northeastern faculty members, and graduate students. The multimedia work of the center has included the *Migration* CD-ROM, preparatory work on a CD-ROM on technology in world history, and a time line for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The web site of the center includes teaching resources, bibliography, papers and credentials of students and faculty, and working papers. Students are active in H-WORLD as coeditors and book review editors; they help maintain the H-WORLD web site; and participate as discussants. The World History Resource Center, linking the World History Center and the School of Education, conducts outreach and professional development for elementary and secondary teachers. It works cooperatively with school systems and with other outreach centers to provide teaching materials and to develop teaching skills and an awareness of issues in world history.

Difficulties for Graduate Study in World History

The greatest difficulty for graduate study in world history has been the first step: creating programs. For large departments in particular, the focus on specializations within world regions makes it organizationally difficult to find a space for world history. Historians of the United States and Europe have been preoccupied by their large literatures, so that ventures in world history have tended to remain in the hands of smaller factions of Third World historians. The lack of world history lines in these prestigious departments is itself a disincentive to training global historians. Nevertheless, several new programs have formed and others are under discussion.⁴

If the founding of programs has been difficult, enabling them to flourish has also had its problems. The World History Association (WHA) is an energetic organization, whose membership of 1,300 is now less than 10 percent of that of the AHA. But the WHA has low dues, no professional staff, and is not at the table of the American Council of Learned Societies along with the area studies organizations and the AHA. With the exception of Northeastern's World History Center, there are virtually no equivalents in world history to the research centers for national and area studies scholarship.

Locating fellowship funds for language study and dissertation research has not been easy. Fellowships for overseas study are generally tightly focused on regional study. Even the International Dissertation Research Fellowship of the Social Science Research Council, which includes comparative and global study within its purview, has in practice been awarded to students writing area studies dissertations, and not to applicants with projects in global history.

Area studies scholars have been cautious about embracing world history, fearing that global studies are proposed as a substitute for area studies. It is true that the end of the cold war and the rising interest in globalization have brought cuts in area studies funding. There has not, however, been any equivalent rise in funding for global studies in history or other social sciences. Meanwhile, to address this potential conflict between world history and area studies, we have sought to form an alliance in New England among area studies specialists and those focusing on world history.⁵

An analogous issue is the relationship between world history and the history of the United States and Europe. Roughly half the students in our program have a primary regional interest in the United States and Europe. This puts us in a position of learning how to articulate where the United States and Europe fit into global history. To pick two issues: studies of fascism in global context will necessarily focus heavily on Italy, but may elicit connections that would not come forth in a study in primarily European context; and studies of film history will naturally focus on Hollywood and on European film, but in global context may show unexpected

parallels with Indian or Mexican film.

A Research Agenda

The theme of the WHA International Conference for 2000 (hosted by Northeastern in Boston, June 22-25, 2000) is "The Research Agenda for World History." This conference and the research agenda will address the analytical and empirical choices of world historians.

The analytical approaches among which world historians choose may be labeled as local, comparative, interactive, synthetic, and planetary. World history is more than a single field of study, and the world is more than an additional area to work into a crowded curriculum. Study of the world involves selecting among competing frameworks of analysis: Istanbul and Malacca are significant nodes in world history, but deforestation is a planetary issue. A major element of the debate on the research agenda should be the balance among these alternative approaches.

In empirical study, debate on the research agenda will focus on the allocation of research efforts among early and recent times and on the various themes, topics, and regions. For instance, political and economic studies have always been central in the literature on world history, and the current debate on the economic history of the modern world will surely be prominent at the conference. At the same time, issues in social and cultural history are open for important work—for instance on migration, on cultural connections among regions, and on the interplay of religious communalism and nationalism.

Developing global perspectives on history is already beginning to elicit a distinctive view of the past. The works of Alfred Crosby, Philip Curtin, William H. McNeill, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Andre Gunder Frank have had significant impact on historical studies generally. Yet with so vast a topic, we require organized and disciplined study. There is a great deal of work to be done, and over a long time, before the intellectual potential of global historical studies can be realized. It appears that, after false starts in earlier times, world history is now getting its grounding as a research field.

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