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# The Past is Another Planet: The Absence of Funding for Global Historical Research

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In this era of globalization, studies of global patterns are all the rage. Ecological transformations, shifting global politics, the world economy, and cultural globalization are hot topics. But those who study the history of global patterns find that they might as well be on another planet. They are free to expend their own energies on world history, but nobody wants to talk about allocating research funds to them. 1

At a recent meeting of 200 researchers and teachers from 8 countries, called to set an agenda for research and institutional growth in world history, seven funding institutions declined or ignored invitations to attend and lead a panel on research funding, so the session was cancelled. The National Science Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies, Social Science Research Council, Ford Foundation, Carnegie Foundation, and Spencer Foundation were otherwise occupied. The National Endowment for the Humanities expressed interest but lacked funds to attend. The conference, entitled "World History: The Next Ten Years," was convened by the World History Center at Northeastern University and co-sponsored by the American Historical Association and the World History Association. 2

Perhaps the collection of no-shows was simply rotten luck, but the result fit into a larger pattern. The logic of marginalizing research on the global past stems from a set of widely shared assumptions. 3

First, "globalization" is assumed to refer to the future and not to the past. Academics join the man in the street to assume that planetary interactions have suddenly expanded. Second, the study of history is assumed to provide beliefs appropriate for citizens more than it provides knowledge for social science. The U.S. Congress has allocated \$130 million in recent years for study in "traditional values" in U.S. history, but no public or private organizations have allocated funds for research on the global past. Third, the natural world is seen as global, but human society is assumed to be parochial constrained within units of ethnicity, nation, or civilization. Ahistorical social sciences conduct research on a global scale, but research into changes over time must be constrained within geographic limits. 4

Should not the assumptions behind this disconnect be tested? The most elemental principle of scientific analysis is the identification, critique, and verification of assumptions. The current research in International Relations, Economics, and in environmental and global cultural studies focuses on the present and future, and thus assumes that patterns from the past are of no interest. Long-term patterns are assumed to have been broken by the sharp changes of recent years. Perhaps these assumptions are correct. But it is prudent to verify the assumption by conducting research to seek out long-term, large- 5

scale patterns, to see if they provide precedents or continuing influences influencing present changes.

In fact, recent searches for global patterns of human history show a remarkable collection of such patterns, suggesting that many more await discovery. Studies of human evolution now show how recently *Homo sapiens* evolved, how uniform we are genetically as compared with other species, how rapidly our ancestors moved around the planet, and how consistently local groups have mixed with each other. This work comes primarily from geneticists, but it provides a challenge to historians to square this information with our recent history of racial discrimination and racial hierarchy. Geologists have recovered and dated records of volcanic explosions, suggesting that they caused droughts and famines at great distances. It will require historians to link these data to the wars, revolutions, religious movements, literary creations, and regional interactions resulting from these traumas.

Historians, working with economists, have pieced together a picture of the global silver trade from the seventeenth century, linking the economies of every continent a picture different from the parochial notion of "the expansion of Europe." And another group of economic historians has identified the "great divergence" at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when economies of the North Atlantic suddenly shot ahead and left other economies in relative poverty.

It is well known that every generation needs to rewrite its history. But the need is particularly great at present. Historical studies of the past have focused on societies, on the assumption that they were autonomous. We now can see global patterns of interaction in society, economy, and culture. To apply this global perspective to the past, we need to reconsider the old histories, and look for the global patterns that have been hidden until now. The use of new data (such as environmental and genetic information) and the transformation of existing data (linking the languages and the currencies of China, Persia, Ethiopia, and Italy) expands the task.

But who is preparing young scholars to study these issues? Of the 8,000 history PhDs awarded during the past ten years, only 17 were in world history. I estimate that another 26 world-history PhDs will be granted in the next ten years, most of them without the funding that would support language study, research travel, or other research expenses. Thus we may say that, not only do we now lack historians trained in study of the past as a global level, but we will probably lack such historians 20 years from now.

The conference at which world historians met to plan their future was convened on the occasion of the closing of the World History Center. This center, founded in 1994, was the first to emphasize global analysis in history. The doctoral program associated with the center has produced 12 of the 17 world history PhDs, and the center gained over \$2 million in funding. The funding, however, was overwhelmingly earmarked for teaching rather than research, and virtually none of the doctoral students gained research grants from the university or external funders. The center's closure, for lack of local or national funding, is a clear reflection of the low priority of global historical studies.

Part of the problem lies with the historical profession. Historians think of history as local studies, and think of world history as an accumulation of local studies. When they define a job a "world history" they mean a job to teach freshman surveys, and they want a faculty member who knows about a couple world regions (outside the U.S. and Europe). This rarely has to do with research.

But the national academic leadership can hardly blame the problem on historians and neglect the issue. The current attempt to understand emerging global patterns, if based solely on the short-term patterns that can be documented for the past two or three decades, will simply fail to appreciate the longer-term dynamics that are also at work. Human society is surely changing at a rapid rate in our lifetime. But given the resources we have and the future at stake, it is a foolhardy bet to stake all our

marbles on the assumption that nothing in the collective human past is worthy of systematic analysis.

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Biographical Note: Pat Manning is Professor of History and African-American Studies, Director of the World History Center (until its closure in July 2004), and author of *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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