

Rethinking Global History

The Balzan FRIAS Project in Global History

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Project Directors: Professor Bernd Kortmann (FRIAS); Stefanie Gänger (University of Heidelberg), Co-Director

Affiliated Institution: Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS)

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Website: <https://www.frias.uni-freiburg.de/de/personen/fellows/aktuelle-fellows/osterhammel/#Projekt>

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Background: Global History as a General Perspective and a Sub-Discipline in Its Own Right

After about three decades of expansion, the situation of global history as an academic sub-discipline remains ambiguous. On the one hand, global history has rapidly established itself as an important approach within historical studies. At least in the United States, it has already crystallized as a “field” with a well-developed scholarly infrastructure. While at the present time only a small minority of historians practice global history professionally and on a regular basis, there can be no doubt that the general awareness of non-Western history and of the need to place historical studies in a global horizon has increased considerably. Thirty years ago, what is now subsumed under the broad heading “global history” was divided between an amateurish “world history” and “extra-European” or “non-Western” history tucked away at the margins of the profession, especially in Continental Europe (with the possible exception of the Netherlands). Since then, “global history” has gained impressively in attention and respectability.

On the other hand, this remarkable success comes at a certain cost. Global history has extended its reach to ever more topics without having rethought thoroughly enough the methodologies inherited from older fields within historiography. Thus, there is an urgent need for careful reflection on methods, theories, terminologies and criteria of quality assessment. Issues such as explanation, comparison, narrative strategies, time and space, etc., merit fresh consideration. All this requires a vast international effort and would overstrain the resources even of a Balzan Prize project. However, it is worthwhile joining parallel efforts undertaken elsewhere to get this kind of theoretical work established on a broader basis. Osterhammel's Balzan project will contribute to that aim.

An additional weakness of current global history is its reluctance to tackle the twentieth century. Almost all the groundbreaking work in global history has focused on the early modern period and the nineteenth century. While an enormous number of books on the twentieth century carry the word "global" in their titles, the vast majority of them are mere additive descriptions of historical events and developments at different places across the globe. At first sight, globality should be easy to detect and analyse in what may be called a century of globalization. Surprisingly, this does not seem to be the case. The reason may be that historians are faced with an over-complex reality while they lack the robust tools of the social sciences for reducing complexity to simple models and quantitative indicators. Therefore, the present Balzan project will put a special emphasis on the global history of the twentieth century while it wants to encourage historians working on the twentieth century to learn from the more highly developed study of earlier periods.

This will be done keeping in mind the transfer of knowledge to a wider public. Global history has recently evinced a certain tendency to withdraw into an ivory tower, to delight in intricate puzzles and to neglect the issues of real life. This stands in contrast to the expectation of readers, including a few politicians, that the insights of global history be made relevant and fruitful for the present day. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the public role of global history research and to discuss ways in which its results can be disseminated beyond academia. The Balzan project will address this challenge.

The project will be divided into two related parts. The first part comprises a combination of high-profile lectures by senior scholars, fellowships for junior scholars and workshops where seniors and juniors are brought together. The second part of the

project singles out a specific topic about which a series of conferences will be organized, resulting in the publication of a collection of scholarly papers.

Institutional Framework and Organization of the Project

The two-part project is being hosted by the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), directed by Professor Bernd Kortmann. Osterhammel has been appointed Distinguished Fellow at FRIAS for the duration of the Balzan-FRIAS Project (approximately, spring 2019 to spring 2023) by the Rector of the University of Freiburg, Professor Hans-Jochen Schiewer.

Professor Stefanie Gänger, chair of global history at the University of Heidelberg, will act as Co-Director. Gänger is a former member of Osterhammel's Konstanz-based research group "Global Processes," a Cambridge alumna, and a specialist on Latin American history. Her first book (Oxford University Press) was on the collecting and study of pre-Columbian antiquities in independent Latin America, and her second monograph investigating the global circulation of medical drugs around 1800 is currently being reviewed for publication by Cambridge University Press.

Sub-Project One: Global History and the Problems of Today Fellowships and Lecture-Workshops

- I. Four (perhaps more, depending on the actual costs of Sub-Project Two) junior fellowships of six months each, two in summer 2020 and another pair in summer 2021. The international advertisement for the fellowships will be addressed to postdocs at an advanced stage of writing their second book (*Habilitation*). They should work on topics from the "long" twentieth-century's global history, not excluding those that place the twentieth century in a long-term perspective. Successful applicants should also have a distinct interest in issues of theory and historical methodology.
- II. A series of seven to eight Balzan-FRIAS Lectures, beginning in early 2020, by senior scholars in global – and international – history, with an overarching title "Global History and the Problems of Today". The public lecture itself will be accompanied by a seminar (master class) conducted by the guest speaker on the following day. This seminar will be organized in conjunction with the Balzan-FRIAS Fellows in residence at the time. It will be open to the FRIAS community, to teachers and students of history and neighbouring disciplines at Freiburg, and above all, to

PhD students from a catchment area that loosely comprises Southwestern Germany, Alsace, Switzerland and Northern Italy. The lectures, supplemented with chapters by Osterhammel and a few more invited contributors, are intended to be published by a major publishing house as the *Balzan-FRIAS Lectures*.

Sub-Project Two: Disconnected Histories: Global History and Regional Dynamics Conferences and Edited Volume

Three conferences will bring together scholars from all career stages. Aims of this part of the project are similar to those of Sub-Project One: to bridge the gap between generations and to allow young scholars to become better acquainted with senior figures in the field. However, Sub-Project Two is more focused, with a topical contribution based on the notion of global history as committed to connections and connectivity, that is to say, as the historical study of ever-closer integration in many different fields from trade and migration to information technology. Today's world is subject to an increasing decoupling of the specific logic and dynamic of regions and of societal sub-systems with global trends that affect humanity in its entirety. Globalization has different effects on regional systems, and there is no steady progress towards increasing connectivity. The Balzan-FRIAS Project will study this kind of dissociation in its historical dimension during the historical period with which Osterhammel is most familiar, i.e., history since about 1700. Unlike existing studies, the project will explore phenomena of disconnection, or in other words, the variable and often contradictory relationship between different levels of integration.

Conference 1 will be a small planning workshop held at FRIAS. It will deal with historical theories of globalization, focusing on “connections / disconnections”, yielding a conceptual paper to serve as a blueprint for the subsequent conferences.

Conference 2 will move to Heidelberg. It will focus on case studies from around the world, ca. 1700-1920.

Conference 3 will again take place at FRIAS. It will be on the twentieth century. In this phase, Gänger and Osterhammel will select papers from the three conferences and prepare them for publication in a one-volume collection.