

Globalism before Globalization

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Abstract:

In this volume, Classen brings together 19 case studies of economic, political, technological interconnectedness during the Middle Ages and Early Modernity. It is a contribution to the 'global turn' in history: challenging contemporary assumptions that globalism is very recent, but also the entrenched view of the Eurocentrism of previous times, giving the essays urgent relevance. Further, written by a combination of early-career researchers and established scholars, the book itself provides an excellent example of global, interdisciplinary scientific research.

Globalismus vor der Globalisierung

German Abstract:

In diesem Band versammelt Classen 19 Fallstudien über wirtschaftliche, politische und technologische Verflechtungen im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Damit trägt er zum ‚global turn‘ der Geschichtswissenschaft bei: Er stellt nicht nur die zeitgenössische Annahme in Frage, dass der Globalismus sehr jung ist, sondern auch die eingefahrene Sichtweise des Eurozentrismus früherer Zeiten, was den Aufsätzen dringende Aktualität verleiht. Darüber hinaus ist das Buch, das sowohl von Nachwuchsforscher_innen als auch von etablierten Wissenschaftler_innen verfasst wurde, ein hervorragendes Beispiel für globale, interdisziplinäre wissenschaftliche Forschung.

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What's at stake?

It goes nearly unquestioned that everyone is familiar with the terms global and globalism, and that globalization began in the 1980s. Going begging are the obvious questions: was there no global world/globalism before that? If not the current interconnected world, what was globalism or globalization in times past? Can we speak of it in previous historical eras? History is precisely undergoing what is known as a 'global turn,' a reconsideration of past events through a broader, global context. This 'turn' has several goals: trying to see past events beyond merely how they lead to our present; increase the interdisciplinarity of history; finally, the 'global turn' seeks to decenter previous epochs, and specifically the Middle Ages, from an exclusively European perspective. Decentering Europe is particularly important, given that the Medieval period is being used today to construct justificatory myths for white European and North American dominance of the world. Among the many scholarly articles that point to this trend, Shoshana Adler is perhaps only the most explicit: "White supremacists tend to fetishize the European Middle Ages" ("Spoiled History: Leprosy and the Lessons of Queer Medieval Historiography" *boundary 2* 50:3, 2023, doi:10.1215/01903659-10472443). Examples abound also beyond strictly academic literature: writing in *The Guardian*, Jamie Mackay remarks about JRR Tolkien's novel, *Lord of the Rings*, that "the sagas of Middle-earth do fit pretty neatly into the logic of contemporary rightwing populism;" the repurposed fantasy of the Middle Ages serves powerful conservatives, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, as "space where they could explore their ideology in socially acceptable terms" ("How Did The Lord of the Rings Become a Secret Weapon in Italy's Culture Wars?" 3 November 2023).

Globalism v. globalization

A central figure in the ‘global turn’ in history has been Albrecht Classen, editor of the book here in question, *Globalism in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age*, which grew out of a symposium held in the spring of 2022 at the University of Arizona titled *Pre-modern Globalism*. The volume comprises 19 essays, plus a comprehensive introduction and epilogue by Classen. In addition to contributing an essay, in the introduction, Classen gives a brief background of the ‘global turn,’ presents the reader with historians advocating and opposing the paradigm of a global Middle Ages, and lays out the theoretical argument and structure of the whole book, while also managing to sketch a few examples from his wealth of historical and literary knowledge. “The current book will [...] pursue the same goal of confirming the presence of globalism already well before the modern era, and this on the basis of numerous individual case studies” (p. 3). Note that while Classen is clearly a proponent of the global Middle Ages, the volume is clearly presented as a scientific contribution to an idea, not *absolute proof* of it. The introduction also encapsulates the book’s method: presenting various case studies that flesh out contact, encounters, influences, clashes among various cultures, civilizations, and worlds – in a word, the globalism – of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period.

But what is meant by globalism? For Classen, drawing on the political scientist Joseph Nye, the world has always been global, but to different degrees: globalism can be thick or thin. In the first essay of the collection, “Global Inferno: Medieval Giants, Monsters, and the Breaching of the Great Barrier,” Fidel Fajardo-Acosta defines two terms more closely: *globalism* is “a consciousness of the interrelatedness and interdependences of the phenomena that take place within the spacetimes made possible by our perceptions, cognitions, and imaginations,” while *globalization* is “an imperialist attempt at the domination and reduction of all otherness to the identity of the globalizing power” (p. 104). Indeed, the two concepts can be at odds with one another; Fajardo-Acosta likens globalization to Dante’s three-faced Satan, reducing otherness to monolithic identity in its attempt to “own and control everyone and everything” (p. 105). Globalism, on the other hand, is (among else) “the pointing out of the apocalyptic consequences of globalization” (p. 104).

Globalism, but when and where?

Fajardo-Acosta's definitions of these terms over a couple of pages are one of the few places where the book delves into the issue of globalism from a purely theoretical perspective. The volume editor chose to advance his point less through theoretical debate, and more with each essay presenting a case study illustrative of globalism in the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods. The difficulty in structuring the book this way, however, is that it is not always clear that these individual cases add up to globalism. For example, William Mahan's essay "Going Rogue Across the Globe: International Vagrants, Outlaws, Bandits, and Tricksters from Medieval Europe, Asia, and the Middle East," presents a fascinating cast of characters; but beyond the fact that outlaws existed in all times and places, it is not clear how they were global. It is not clear that they fulfill the "consciousness" part of Fajardo-Acosta's/the book's criterion of globalism. Similarly, Peter Dobek's "The Diplomat and the Public House: Ioannes Dantiscus (1485–1548) and His Use of the Inns, Taverns, and Alehouses of Europe" turns out to be an intra-European affair, without any sense of a global world.

More convincing of globalism are the later essays by Thomas Willard and Reinhold Münster. Thus, John Dee, advisor to Queen Elizabeth I, was the first person to use the phrase British Empire (to mean what we do today), and the setting of this empire was indeed global. Münster's survey of the works of the little-known seventeenth-century journalist and novelist, Eberhard Werner Happel also clearly shows that from the port city of Hamburg, Happel was truly seeking to present "for the amusement and benefits of his readership [the] '*Denkwürdigkeiten*' (remarkable/memorable events) which would concern the '*gantze Welt*' (whole world)" (p. 602). Happel seems to have had a proto-anthropological streak to him: he informed readers about customs of far-away peoples, and was, remarkably, critical of European practices of torture and enslaving Africans. Perhaps the best evidence that Happel thought globally is that he published a calculation of the circumference of the earth and an estimate of the total human population (at one billion, p. 604). Both Dee and Happel, however, lived in the Early Modern period – after the invention of print, the European discovery of the Americas, after several circumnavigations – meaning that the case remains

open whether we can speak of globalism before these events, that is, of a 'global' Middle Ages.

Global science

Perhaps this very openness of the question of globalism is the book's best feature. Not only does it present the reader with this significant question without foisting a solution, it is also important to note here just how good a representation this book is of science done in real time. The volume appeared a little over a year after the symposium, speaking to authors' and publishers' sense of urgency to present it. The bulk of the essays are by doctoral candidates from institutions across the world, which in combination with more established scholars is not as common as it should be and signals freshness and promise of this line of research. Finally, drawing liberally on the fields of history, literature, architecture, military studies, medicine, geography, metallurgy even, it will appeal strongly to researchers of culture, indeed it sets the bar high for all the aspects of studying a historical-cultural phenomenon.

If the volume's interdisciplinarity and involvement of early-career researchers are examples of how academic books should look, the interesting essays will certainly appeal also to a wider, non-professional audience, but the importance of the topic it tackles and the political stakes of that debate are what make *Globalism in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age* exceptionally relevant for our present (global) world.