

Current Approaches to Global History

Budapest Lecture Series

The Global History of Dynasty: a Plea for Comparison

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1051 Budapest, Nádor u. 15., Auditorium A
Central European University (CEU)

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Many historians have serious doubts about comparative history, particularly about global comparison. It has been argued that global comparison necessarily views the world through the prism of one region, using one cultural standard to measure others. Profound cultural differences are buried under bland general clichés, or forced into rigid typologies and teleologies. Indeed, after the cultural turn the effort to define patterns of behaviours shared by people in many places and periods has found few outspoken advocates. Most global historians nowadays focus on connections and exchanges; they examine the process of globalization. Global comparative history, conversely, mostly deals with the 'divergence' debate: when and why did the West obtain its marked advantage? These two very different forms of global history therefore usually deal with only a limited number of cases: either the zones connected by the traffic of people, good, and ideas, or the winners and the near-winners of the global economic interest. They are global in inspiration rather than in scope.

In my talk I will explain the motives and design of my *Dynasties. A Global History of Power 1300-1800*. The book is a statement about the enduring relevance of comparison, and an experiment in resolving some of the problems of global comparison. What makes dynasty a suitable theme? Which questions can be asked at a global level? And how can it be helpful to compare African chiefdoms without script with the Chinese empire, in terms of scale and development as well as the immense difference in source materials? What criteria did I use to select my cases? Why could a book along these lines not have been written one or two decades ago? Finally, can this method be applied to other themes?

Jeroen Duindam is Professor of Early Modern History at Leiden University. Duindam combines history and anthropology in his comparative work on courts, rulers and elites.

Moderator: Jan Hennings (CEU History Department)

