



Global History and Biography: Reconciling Macro - and Micro Narratives in History Writing

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History, rather than the past itself, is about human constructions of the past in the present. It is the human who gives a shape to time through narratives. Historians tell stories about yesterdays. What we call academic history, is actually a latest evolution within the continuity in historical storytelling. This exciting innovation of the nineteenth century uses conventional scientific instruments to make its audience believe in the told stories.

Before, most of what we call history was subordinate to and shaped by universal ideals representing the providence of the eternally present God, Heaven, or Dharma. The past was not radically separated from the present as it is now in modern history writing. The past represented moral ideals and guides for the present.

The invention of history as an academic discipline in the post-Enlightenment world of the nineteenth century, walked hand in hand with the rise of nationalism and modern nation-state formations. This simultaneous development, along with contemporaneous ideologies of positivism, scientism, materialism identified the historian's task as writing secular, empirical, evidential, and human-centered histories of the nation. Various layers of societies with different senses of spaces were bunched together and imagined as a single nation. with: The national subject of history, required that narratives of other identities be suppressed.

History became the machinery that mythologized its new subjects' premordial claims to a territory and its historical unity through constructing political, diplomatic, and military narratives by using state archives. The symbiosis between the state and academic history doomed history departments to be like other apparatus of the state and its bureaucracy. State sponsored professional historians misused their power to invalidate other views of the past. Reflecting elite interests, the desire for self-realization of the "nation" became enshrined as history.

The short history of this academic discipline obviously tells us that history is the most political of disciplines: Considering its links to the legitimacy of the state and national identity from the very beginning on, history is more political than political sciences. Moreover, as Martin Davies put it in his *Historics: Why History Dominates Society*, history has a total hold over knowledge and over the social imagination.

Self-reflections began after dissatisfaction grew in the post-World-Wars' world, as the new independent nation-states failed to fulfil the idealized expectations. Dissatisfaction spread out and caught grand narratives: Beginning with philosophers, learned people lost faith in

post-Enlightenment future-oriented -isms. Nationalism, liberalism, democracy, capitalism, communism, Marxism, industrialism, technologism, scientism, modernization, etc. Humanities and social sciences began to detect and criticize ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism in previous studies of their disciplines, which misrepresented experiences of non-Western people. Being more aware that grand narratives of the West have narrowed down the diverse historical repertoires of the Rest.

Nowadays historians seek to go beyond the nation and the nation-state as the subject of history writing. As modernization and secularization were the dominant academic paradigms in most of the twentieth century, now perceptions of the past and the future are dominated by globalization. We rethink the essence of the past and the scope of history because we live in a new world: We live in a global space, which becomes more and more a global village, effected by global changes. "Global" as an adjective is now everywhere, also in front of the term of history: "Global history" is called the analysis of historical processes with a sensitivity against nationalist and Eurocentric views, emphasizing interconnectedness, interdependence, similarities, connections, linkages, flux and fluidity, circulation, and contact zones. These catchwords show, as Appadurai put it once, that it is all about "a shift from stability to motion, like globalized world is a world in motion, a world with different speeds and disjunctive flows."

If one looks into Calls for Papers or calls for teaching positions, the demand for the transnational and the global is growing and spreading. Almost thousand booktitles in history sections used the adjective "global" in the last ten years, as a landmark to question the old West-Rest division and to "provincialize Europe."

A contemporaneously rising star in history writing is biography. As I had written some years ago in my article on imperial biography ("Experiencing the Ottoman Empire in a Life-Course"), a growing body of historiography seeks to restore a sense of agency within history and rescue the individual from grand structures: The prism of biography has become widely used to understand how empires function by putting lives in relation with the historical events surrounding them. In turn, individual lives are put into contexts beyond those of the nation and are written in new ways with transnational perspectives. Narrating how lives shaped and were shaped by empires is a powerful strategy for deconstructing the grand narratives that characterize twentieth-century nationalist historiography. Bringing life back into history, these new narratives of multiethnic empires bear the emancipatory potential to challenge the dominant epistemological framework, which restricts individual life to its place in the nation. Imperial lives are exemplary for this effort. They evade official classifications and do not fit squarely into the traditional framework of nationality. With their growing interest in the theoretical challenges posed by biography, historians now pay closer attention to trans-, cross-, non-, and even anti-national lives.

Biographies make history more accessible. There are many attempts to reconcile these two approaches, the individual and the global, and demonstrate the benefits of writing global history with a biographical approach. Our understanding of the global past is deepened with this kind of books which re-evaluate biography. Miles Ogborn's *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550-1800* (2008) animates abstract historical processes with specific

individuals by employing forty biographies. Sanjay Subrahmanyam's book (1997) on Vasco da Gama managed to extract Vasco da Gama from his nationalist frames to construct a proper figure of world history. Natalie Zemon Davies wrote (2006) the biography of an individual with shifting identities between two worlds: in the Islamic countries his name was Hasan al-Wazzan whereas among the Christians he was known as Johannes Leo Africanus. This is the story of a Muslim who lived in the 16th century and wrote several manuscripts during his ten-years of semi-captivity in Rome. Brice Cossart reviewed these examples in 2013 in his article ("Global Lives: Writing Global History with a Biographical Approach").

There is another dimension to this approach of reconciling micro and macro narratives: Imperial Biography. Imperial biographies are life stories of mobile elites connected to imperial structures, reflecting imperial frameworks in which they processed their experiences. Imperial elites experienced the empire as a part of their life courses in midst of contradictions between local realities and changing state structures. They became pressure groups for reorganizing empires, and acted as effective representations of their empires. Their interaction at the interfaces of centre and periphery, state and society shaped, transformed, and circulated imperial images, loyalties and identities. Imperial mobility patterns, career paths and elite circulation in the multinational empires was assuring the transfer of experiences and expectations from old contexts into new ones, as well as the transfiguration of reform concepts in the light of these experiences.

Malte Rolf and Tim Buchen began to work on this conceptualization of imperial biographies in 2009. They organized a section at the *Historikertag* in Berlin 2010, and two international conferences at Berlin and Bamberg in 2012. Five of the eighty papers presented in these twin conferences, representing the British, Ottoman, German, Russian, and Habsburg empires, had been published in a special issue of *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* in 2014 (40/1, January-March). My mentioned article on Ferid Pasha, an Ottoman governor and Grandvizier, was part of this project.¹ Buchen and Rolf edited a bilingual (German and English) volume with seventeen of the remaining papers; nine on the Russian, six on the Habsburg, one on the German and another one on the Ottoman empires; all to show the entanglement of empires and individual careers (*Eliten im Vielvölkerreich. Imperiale Biographien in Russland und Österreich-Ungarn (1850-1918)*, München: de Gruyter, 2015). The book is based upon a (collective-) biographic approach on imperial lives, primarily concerning state officials, military and political elites, experts and entrepreneurs, intellectuals and academics. The editors emphasize the importance of the perspective to understand how historical subjects made sense of the imperial framework as a part of their personal biographical experiences, and how these expressions of subjectivity related to the underlying structural patterns of mobility, career and life-course. Tracing experiences and contributions of elite figures in the light of the imperial and biographical turns in historiography, *Eliten im Vielvölkerreich* is an outstanding book on the inner workings of the empire from personal vantage points. Some of these lives could never been addressed before because they were not fitting into the

¹ The subtitle of my book on the same Ottoman statesman was "Bir Ömür Devlet" – The *State in a lifetime*, and was as the Best Biography of 2014 by the Turkey's Writers Association.

traditional national historiographies. 'Imperial biographies' is a timely approach to better understand the interplay of nation and empire, and also to rediscover the alterabilities, heterogeneities and the ambiguities of empires. The idea of the symbiotic interconnection and non-opposition between national awareness and imperial loyalty is exciting.

My humble article was on the same line. In an era of constant change, Ferid Pasha occupied the most important position of the Ottoman Empire, the grandviziership, after having served in various provincial and some central government offices. With his stirring imperial career, Ferid Pasha is an outstanding example of cross-empire mobility, transfer of experiences, and imperial loyalty. He was a member of a famous Albanian family, the Vlora dynasty, whose many members not only served the Ottoman Empire, but also played crucial roles in the establishment and government of the Albanian national state after 1912. Mastering the Albanian, Turkish, French, Arabic, Italian and Greek languages, he became an imperial statesman of the highest echelons, serving in various corners of an empire that ruled over provinces on three continents. Diligent in all his offices, he was an exceptional reformer both as governor and as Grandvizier.

Having served in many corners of the Empire, under the rule of four Sultans and in some very tumultuous times, Ferid Pasha's career developed parallel to administrative and judicial reorganizations and may be seen as a running commentary upon structural transformations in the late Ottoman administration. I narrated his career in relation to these reorganizations in order to show how both can overlap and interfere with one another. In this sense, it was possible to speak of experiencing the late Ottoman Empire as a life course.

By assuming coherence in ethnic categorizations, and thereby fixing the meanings of the past and insufficiently representing historical complexities, nationalistic historiography tells very little about actual human subjects of empires. Analyzing lives and careers in multiethnic empires as imperial biographies helps to overcome the monolithic boundaries that nationalistic historiographies imposed ex post on life courses that were rather characterized by their empire-wide mobility, a constant crossing of cultures and geographies and a complex structure of overlapping loyalties and identities.

The first dimension that made Ferid Pasha's biography imperial is the extent of his colourful career path, and his intra-empire mobility. He moved through various career stations in Crete, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Dubrovnik, Eastern Anatolia, Aleppo, Bursa, Konya, Izmir, and Istanbul, which are all now parts of six different nation-states. After proving his energy and loyalty as the governor of Konya, he was assigned to the grandviziership, the ultimate position a statesman could achieve at the center of the Ottoman Empire. Imperial lives transcend national borders and cross the usual cartographic boundaries, and can be at best captured by taking mobility as a frame, instead of, say, nation.

Another dimension weaving Ferid's imperial biography was his transferring of experiences among the different places and offices he moved through. Wartime experiences in difficult areas could easily turn into sensitivity for the necessity of immediate reform and development in peaceful grounds for saving the remainders of the Empire. The transfer of experience from older contexts was an instrument not only for saving the day, but also for

dealing with sober longterm problems.

The last dimension of the imperial biography presented in work was that of images, loyalties and identities. Ferid Pasha's Albanian origin had a profound influence on his political career. There were times when he was not appointed to certain positions considered potentially challenging for his overlapping Ottoman and Albanian identities. But he clearly disassociated himself from the Albanians when he was in power. He played a tricky balancing act, sometimes even seeming contradictory. Officialdom made Ferid gradually and increasingly more of a statist and he learned how to control his Albanianist side while becoming more and more an "Ottoman" during his career, that is to say, a man of the Empire. In the run of his career and his successive promotions, he became the perfect imperial statesman, and tried to detach himself from oppositional and nationalist personalities. But at every chance, he also tried to clear the name of the Albanians as a nation. Even in times of riots in that region he tried to convince the Sultan that they were loyal to the crown.

Ferid's loyalty issue indicates that imperial biographies could be the best way to emphasize penetrations, intertwinings, and hybridizations that position individual persons in multicultural belongings as transcultural selves, and suggests that transculturality is historically nothing new and may be indeed the very ordinary. Ferid Pasha acted between parallel realities of the Ottoman Empire. Always conscious of his origins, his bureaucratic career made him more and more loyal to the Ottoman state and the Sultan.

Pointing to "the simultaneity of multiple identities" in British imperial subjects, Angela Woollacott, argued in her book (*To Try her Fortunes in London. Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity*, Oxford 2001) that Australian and New Zealand women writers' colonial, national, and imperial identities were interconstitutive, with much overlap and slippage between them. She mentions Hobsbawm's argument that any individual can sustain all sorts of multiple attachments, and not see them as incompatible, until some kind of conflict arises. Woollacott also notes that Australian national identities were shaped, articulated, and circulated within the far away imperial metropole of London, which testifies to the interdependency of national identities with other, similarly imperial identities. Speaking for late Imperial Russia, Stephen Velychenko rightfully argues that imperial and regional identities coexisted, and at times one identity or loyalty could be more influential than the other : "[R]egional / national backgrounds provided a basis for 'dual loyalty', and faithful service to the tsar and 'Rossia' was not incompatible with concern for the native group and its territories." Madeleine Herren speaks of the "transgressive subject," whose typology she bases on "the contemporaneity of multiple transgressions, including territorial, national, political and social imaginations of order." Thus, one can see that, all in all, the life of Ferid Pasha exemplifies that people can be part of different "plural subjects" at the same time. They can identify themselves with "we"-groups with different aims and with activities informed and circumscribed by different worldviews.

Conclusion

Global history books are mostly macro-narratives which naturally -because of the large scale of their themes- have not much references to primary sources. The mentioned studies which

are only some examples of the call for biography in global and imperial context, can cover this gap.

But there are also some other problems of global history. For example, the reverse flow of ideas from periphery to metropole is absent in many global history studies on circulation of ideas. They are still, consciously or unconsciously, mostly leaning on narratives about the unstoppable dissemination of Western modes of historical thinking. The gaze is from the West onwards. Because the template for explaining the world was made in Europe, at the end, India knows China through Eurocentric frameworks, as Arif Dirlik exemplified once.

Additionally, global history accounts are mostly geographically imbalanced. India, China, Japan, Turkey, Egypt are mostly well-presented because of the vast geography or better-known experience. But Latin America and Africa is more absent. Comparison implies respect for difference. But many global histories are parallel stories without real comparative insights. Or lifeless summaries of national historiographies in subsequent chapters.

Another complication is the language of global history studies: The global academic motto “publish or perish” actually means “publish in English or perish”. Here is the paradox: Global history tries to undermine Eurocentrism, but facilitates the intellectually Anglicizing of the world.

And what will happen after the rhetorical comeback of nation and call for borders in the political World is another important question, pointing on the tendency to endanger postnational and cosmopolitan narratives. The dissatisfaction with the standard accounts of Eurocentrism and modernity have been weakened, but, unfortunately, they have not been replaced. The need for a new narrative of modernity as a common global phenomenon experienced locally in various ways, is obvious. Global change strengthened the appearance of difference between human communities, but those differences were increasingly expressed in similar ways. As put by Christopher Bayly in his *The Birth of the Modern World*, “all local, national, regional histories must therefore be global histories.” Knowledge is growing, perspectives are multiplying. We need to grasp the human past as a whole. While facing a common future, the world needs a common history.

We are now more aware that the past changes in accord with the present. Life and politics changes the way history is narrated. Academic paradigms are highly sensitive to the mentalities of the day. The selection and organization of accounts of the past is at the end a function contemporary mentalities which spring from daily life and politics. Perceptions of the past are reflections of today. Therefore, history is always rewritten. Rewriting reveals much about social change and the negotiating of power relations. History remains a social product, but is also deeply political. Context will shape knowledge, knowledge will shape perceived context. As politics and society change, many other new histories will emerge in the future.