

**BETWEEN NATIONAL HISTORIES  
AND GLOBAL HISTORY**



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# NORDIC WORLD VIEWS – INTRODUCTION

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“World history includes the history of events in all nations and times in combination, to the extent that they influence each other and jointly form a living unit.” This definition by Leopold Ranke was said in 1921 by Kristian Erslev (1852–1930), one of the fathers of modern historical science in Denmark, to be “still an unattainable ideal” as far as pre-19th century history was concerned. Many peoples appear to us without history, he claimed, since it has not been possible to discern from their past any real “development” (udvikling). Others like the Indians and Chinese have only to a very limited extent been in contact with “our cultural development”. World history, as it is taught, can therefore deal only with a very limited part of the world: the cultures of the antiquity around the Mediterranean, and later the peoples of Europe: “They have now spread around the whole earth’s circle and, at least from the 19th century, world history as a combined whole is a reality.”<sup>1</sup>

The global history session at the Congress of Nordic Historians in Tampere from 9 to 10 August 1997 is an attempt to “bring the world back in”, not only the Middle East and the Europe that Erslev knew, but also the many peoples whom he thought to be without an evolutionary history.<sup>2</sup> In this endeavour we shall build on the attempts

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1 *Salmonsens konversationsleksikon*, XI, 1921, 507. (Ranke’s definition is quoted by Erslev in Danish translation, and is here translated from the Danish into English.)

2 We have deliberately chosen to use “world history” and “global history” interchangeably, since we do not want to support Bruce Mazlish’s attempt to found a new global history tradition in opposition to world historians. Mazlish sees three differences between global and world history: (1) global historians start from today’s globalisation; (2) global historians transcend the nation-state as the

esses to counter eurocentrism through the promotion of “third world history”, but our approach shall be truly global, not just third world.<sup>3</sup> During much of the 20th century, while communication networks, business, media, culture and politics have been rapidly globalising, we who are Ranke’s and Erslev’s followers have been inclined to dig massively into our own local or national societies, and to neglect the study of the world as a whole. This is no Nordic peculiarity. In most countries the historical discipline has reflected the nation-building process. Of the few who have dared to cross national borders, most have either specialised in one particular area or concentrated on the study of state-to-state relations within the confines of so-called “diplomatic” or “international history”. The popular need for conceptual ways of ordering the world has not diminished, but few Nordic historians have tried to get the whole world in their hands. An exception is Niels Steensgaard of the University of Copenhagen who in his two volumes of Aschehoug’s and Bra Böcker’s 16-volume world history, has presented a tantalising model for keeping the 16th-18th century world conceptually together.<sup>4</sup> Another exception is Åke Holmberg of the University of Gothenburg who has single-handedly written a History of Our World, emphasising cultural encounters and the development of communications.<sup>5</sup>

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focus of history; and (3) no single global history is anticipated. These distinctions are unnecessary. World historians can also start from today’s globalisation, but it would not be recommendable to create a field where everybody is required to be so interested in contemporary processes that these become the starting point for their historical enquiries. World historians have already in many cases successfully transcended the nation-state as a focus point and will continue to do so. While it may be true that many world historians have aimed at a single all-encompassing narrative, this tendency will most certainly be reduced the more research we undertake of various world-wide processes. Some, however, will still want to offer their version of a universal history of the globe, and such attempts should be welcome. What we wish to promote is a global history which builds on the world history tradition while developing it in the directions recommended by Bruce Mazlish: An Introduction to Global History. *Conceptualizing Global History*. Ed. by Bruce Mazlish & Ralph Buultjens. Westview, Boulder 1993, 4.

3 Publications from earlier congresses include: *The History of the Third World in Nordic Research*. Ed. by M. Mörner and T. Svensson. Kungl. Vetenskaps- och Vitterhets-Samhället, Göteborg 1986. *The Transition of Rural Society in the Third World*. Ed. by M. Mörner and T. Svensson. Routledge, London 1991.

4 Vols. 7 and 9, Bra Böcker, Höganäs 1985 (French edition as *Mémoires du monde*, 1995-96). Steensgaard has presented his model in: *Verdenshistorien set fra 1984. Tradition og metode. Festskrift til Sven Ellehøj*. Copenhagen 1984, 413-435.

5 Åke Holmberg: *Vår världshistoria. Från urtid till nutid*. Natur och Kultur, Borås 1982.

Discussions about global issues are bound to intensify over the next couple of years. The aim of the global history session is to prepare Nordic historians for joining the discussions about the state-of-the-world in conjunction with the onset of the new millennium. More specifically the session is going to be part of the preparations for the World Congress of Historians in Oslo 2000. This explains why we have chosen, just as at the third world sessions in Odense 1984 and Reykjavik 1984, to conduct our debates in English. Thus we integrate our papers and discussions in an ongoing endeavour to increase awareness of global history world-wide. This is also why we have invited one of the main inspirators of the Association of World History and the Journal of World History, Professor Jerry Bentley of Hawaii, to deliver the opening address.

The ten essays to follow can be divided into three main categories:

- Conceptual approaches to global history (Rahbek Rasmussen, Simensen, Fält, Blom)
- Big questions and huge comparisons (Østergaard, Mörner, Utvik)
- Studies of the big in the small (Brimnes, Koponen, Jacobsen).<sup>6</sup>

## Conceptual Approaches

The Icelandic historian Snorre Sturluson (1179–1241) begins *Heimskringla*, his chronicle of the Kings of Norway, by presenting a Nordic conception of the world as a whole:

It is said that *Kringla heimsins* [Orbis terrarum; the earth's circle] which the human race inhabits is torn across into many bights, so that great seas run into the land from the out-ocean. Thus it is known that a great sea goes in at Narvesund [Gibraltar], and up to the land of Jerusalem. From the same sea a long sea-bight stretches towards the north-east, and is called the Black Sea, and divides the three parts of the earth; of which the eastern part is called Asia, and the western is called by some Europa, by some Enea. North-

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6 In this introduction I shall give a brief summary of what I found most interesting in each essay. These summaries are mine and have not been read by the authors. I have taken the liberty to sometimes exaggerate and add ideas of my own. So do not quote from my summaries. Quote from the essays themselves.

ward of the Black Sea lies Swithiod the Great, or the Cold. The Great Swithiod is reckoned by some as not less than the Great Serkland [Northern Africa]; others compare it to the Great Blue-land [Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa]. The northern part of Swithiod lies uninhabited on account of frost and cold, as likewise the southern parts of Blue-land are waste from the burning of the sun. In Swithiod are many great domains, and many races of men, and many kinds of languages. There are giants, and there are dwarfs, and there are also blue men, and there are any kinds of stranger creatures. There are huge wild beasts, and dreadful dragons. On the south side of the mountains which lie outside of all inhabited lands runs a river through Swithiod, which is properly called by the name of Tanais, but was formerly called Tanaquisl, or Vanaquisl, and which falls into the Black Sea. The country of the people on the Vanaquisl was called Vanaland, or Vanaheim; and the river separates the three parts of the world, of which the easternmost part is called Asia, and the westernmost Europa.

This English translation was downloaded in Copenhagen from <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/OMACL/Heimskringla/yinglinga.html>, a computer site on the west coast of the continent that Snorre in his chronicle of King Olav Trygvasson called “Vinland”, and which he situated beyond Greenland.<sup>7</sup> It was customary in Snorre’s time, which was well before Erslev and the Swedish Weibull brothers turned Nordic history into an empiricist science,<sup>8</sup> to take departure in an explicit world view. Now, at the end of Snorre’s millennium, world views are called for again, and the loudest call is heard from the former “Vinland”, where universities have for some years been bringing the world (back) into historical scholarship and teaching. Nowhere is Fernand Braudel’s civilizational approach as popular as in North America, and in no other place is “world system theory” as seriously discussed. This is the subject of Jens Rahbek Rasmussen’s opening essay, a Nordic view of American preoccupations with the world.

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7 The Old Norse version, as organised and presented by Finnur Jónsson in 1911, was reprinted and published by Gad and Scandinavian University Press in Copenhagen and Oslo 1966. A printed English version was published by L.M. Hollander and University of Texas Press in 1977.

8 Lauritz Weibull (1873–1960) and Curt Weibull (1886–1991).

Jens Rahbek Rasmussen sees a breakthrough for world history in North American universities during the 1980s and 1990s, after a long period when William H. McNeill was virtually alone. Until the Second World War, American universities mainly gave courses on “Western civilization” with the history of freedom as the basic narrative idea, and with much the same Mediterranean and West European genealogy as that described by Erslev. After the Second World War, studies of Asia and Africa took off in the form of “area studies”. The major comparative historical works from the 1950s to 1970s were not written by historians, but by social scientists. Only in the 1980s did synthetic analysis start to gain academic respectability among historians. This has also tended to somewhat increase the status of writing textbooks, and the Association of World History has done much to promote university courses in world history. Rahbek Rasmussen refers to lively debates about how to teach world history, debates that have been conspicuously lacking in Europe. Towards the end of Rahbek Rasmussen’s essay, he offers some tentative remarks on the Nordic approach to world history, suggesting that we need to take a long-term look at our own global historiography.

Jarle Simensen is also inspired by North American debates. In the second essay, he takes up the question of whether or not there is a “global society” today. There was no such thing in the past. Instead there were multiple societies – indeed many worlds – on earth. Simensen’s query is if most of the many local, national or civilizational societies of the past have already been amalgamated into a “society” comprising us all, or if they remain distinct. The answer might perhaps be relative. As the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth has shown, identities are formed in relation to others and continuously change from one relationship to the next. Thus, since the existence of extra-terrestrial human beings remains to be proven, a global identity cannot exist. There are simply no others to relate to. But perhaps a “society” does not require an identity, or perhaps the global identity could be defined in relation to tasks or threats on a global scale. “Global society” might then be grounded in a shared preoccupation with securing the future of humanity.

Simensen, a specialist on African and contemporary world history, chooses a different, systemic approach. He uses the concept “society” to depict “the entire complex of social relations on a world scale, the only system without a boundary problem.” He argues that we need this systemic concept in order to explain the revolution of 1989. This revolution was global in nature, affecting states in Africa, Asia and Latin America almost as much as those of Eastern Europe. The global

convergence of revolutionary change cannot be explained, says Simensen, by either international power politics or modernisation theory, not even by diffusionist theories. This is why he looks for a systemic explanation. He sees part of the basis for the emerging global society in the expansion of international trade and the internationalization of production, with multi-national companies operating production chains linking distant countries together. The mechanism by which Latin America was drawn into global systemic change was the debt crisis which also affected the Soviet Union and remarkably strengthened the global influence of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the GATT/WTO and a number of regional organisations (EU, Mercosur/NAFTA, APEC, ASEAN). But Simensen's global society also has a normative basis in institutional developments linked to the concept of human rights, with activist groups, churches and global information networks putting pressure on states and corporations. He also sees the mass media as instrumental, not the least in spreading the habits of mass consumption. All of this has created a kind of world-wide-web, but is it already a global society? In the end, Simensen remains doubtful, finding that "globalization is a partial, uneven and contradictory process."

The idea of a global society is not of course new. A kind of global society was imagined in the 1870s on a God-given economic basis by the pre-empiricist Finnish historian and novelist Zacharias Topelius (1818–98), who acceded in 1875 to the presidency of the University of Helsinki. He lived his entire life under the rule of the Czar writing in the Swedish language. His idealised version of a world society was characterised by an international division of labour:

For God has created lands so peculiarly different that no land quite resembles another. There are lands which are remarkably hot, others remarkably cold; yet others agreeably warm. Earth, mountains, quality of the land, plants and animals are remarkably distinct in different countries. There are some thousand million people inhabiting the earth and no two individuals alike. What one country lacks, the other produces. What one person cannot provide, another will deliver, and together people can produce more than anyone on his own. Thus everyone benefits someone else and compensates what others lack. This is the wise order of God: that countries and peoples should need one another. For if everyone had amply on his own, no one would search for the other but live and work solely for

himself. But now people are made to learn to know and help each other so that they will all love and cherish each other as brothers.<sup>9</sup>

This was Topelius' way of introducing the subject of international trade and communications, through which Finns could get iron from Sweden, herring from Norway, salt from England, Portugal and Italy, spices from the East Indies, and tea from China.

"Tea from China" – words evoking, perhaps, an image of mildly rounded hills with leaves being collected in baskets by yellow-skinned women with conical hats. In the third essay of this volume, Olavi Fält does not take the same delight as his compatriot Topelius in the harmony of diversity. Fält is after difference as such, the mental images that mark out certain groups or cultures as significant others. Just like Åke Holmberg, Olavi Fält wants us to study cultural encounters as a way to "gradually lead to the phenomenon of a world culture". He distinguishes four kinds of encounters according to degree of intensity: contact, collision, relationship and acculturation. In the study of all these kinds of encounter, Fält recommends that we examine the images that the cultures have had of each other. Such images, of course, have more to tell about the culture of origin than the culture they represent, but the images are also important for the impact they have on behaviour during the encounter. Where can we find the proper sources for image research? Images are mixtures of memories, hopes, myths, love and hate, so we have to locate textual and other traces of such mental states of mind. In many cases this will not be possible if we are looking for images held by masses and not just elites; only few people leave traces behind them of their mind. Thus we have to content ourselves with studying the texts or artefacts that are supposed to have formed the mental images of many, such as primary school textbooks, popular art or other widely distributed "image-makers". What Fält proposes is to give more weight to an already established field,<sup>10</sup> but he also provides an example from his own research: the image of Japan that was spread in Europe as a result of the first encounters, and the changes made to this image up to 1945. Curiously, according to Fält, before the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, Europeans had a feminine image of Japan leading Russians

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9 Topelius, Zacharias: *Vårt land*. Helsingfors 1875. I am grateful to Benita Heiskanen for help in translating the quoted paragraph.

10 See Holmberg, Åke: *Världen bakom västerlandet*. Vols. 1-2, Göteborg 1988-94.



to underestimate the strength of the Japanese navy. A popular tune in Russia carried the title *Geisha*.

Right across every society goes the great divide between men and women, deeper in some than in others, but prevalent everywhere. In the fourth essay, Ida Blom advances the proposition that we should structure global history around the concept of a “gendered order” or “gender system”. She traces her idea back to the late 18th century German historian Christoph Meiners who compared gender relations in different civilisations. Such perspectives lost ground when 19th century historians abandoned the study of civilisations, focusing on states and nations instead. The topic of Blom’s essay is precisely the relationship between gender and nation. To each nation belongs an “ideoscape” – or nation-of-intent – with the values and hopes of its builders, such as harmony, consensus, democracy, familism, freedom or welfare. Blom looks for the role of gender in these ideoscapes, noticing that in no other nation than Finland have women been comprised in the original idea of the national electorate; until the decolonisation process after the Second World War, Finland was the only democracy to give women the right to vote at the same time as men.

There are basically two ways of including women in a nation-of-intent: as a separate sex with special rights and obligations, or as individuals on the same level as men. There have been protagonists of the first option in most countries, but the second always seems to win out. Women favouring equality and women favouring difference have often agreed on claiming equal legal rights, and the struggle for this aim has tended to strengthen the quest for equality. Blom exemplifies her approach with examples from two big nations (India and Japan), and two small ones (Sweden and Norway). In all four she finds that the national idea has been imbued with heavy symbolism connected with gender differences within the family. But the emphasis on difference has decreased over time. Blom finds clear parallels across the East-West divide, suggesting universalities in human behaviour. But she also finds prevailing cultural differences due partly to the fact that strongly hierarchical religious beliefs are inimical to accepting women as individuals on the same level as men. Blom’s essay is a plea for applying a gender perspective on the global construction of nation-states.

## Big Questions

Among the world's main geographical divisions, the one between East and West is paramount. After his initial description of the earth's circle, Snorre Sturluson presented the people of Asia, the country east of Dnepr or Don called Asaland, or Asaheim, and with Asgaard as its chief city, a great place for sacrifice. His tale evokes an image of a superhuman society combining features of Mount of Olympus with the Karakorum of Genghis Khan (Snorre's contemporary), but there is nothing in Snorre's Asia to evoke the distant lands of China or Japan. They were not parts of his world, but then also Marco Polo had not yet even contemplated his Asian journey by the time Snorre wrote his tale.

One of the biggest comparative questions asked by 20th century historians is why, some 500 years after Genghis, Snorre and Marco Polo, the industrial revolution should happen in Europe and not in China. This question has inspired the momentous work of Joseph Needham (1900–95) – and also his Danish pupil Donald Wagner – about the history of Chinese technology. In his contribution to our volume, another Dane turns the conventional question upside down. Instead of asking why China failed to industrialise, Uffe Østergaard wants to know why Europeans failed to unite again after the decline and fall of Rome. Why did the Chinese remain dedicated to imperial unification right up to the triumph of Mao Zedong in 1949 and the ongoing endeavour to get Hong Kong, Macao – and eventually Taiwan – into their orbit, whereas similar European attempts have failed dismally from Charlemagne to Kohl and Chirac?

The purpose of tracing the failures of European internal imperialism is to understand the peculiarity of the nation-state system resulting from these failures. To understand the historical contingency of the European nation-state system is important to global historians since this system has provided the basis for today's global state system. With help from Charles Tilly, Østergaard finds four main non-national political forms in European history: theocratic federations; clusters of city-states; feudalism; and centralised empires. And he finds the lack of an all-encompassing centralised empire to be the most distinguishing feature of Europe's political development. He examines the rise and fall of the Roman Empire and its long survival in Byzantium, explains the medieval failures of the Holy Roman Empire, studies the later failures of the Habsburgs, and ends up with the ultimate triumph of the Westphalian system in 20th century Europe. He asks an

intriguing question about the future, not Europe's but China's. Will this colossal civilisation with its imperial traditions feel comfortable with the mere role of another nation-state in a world system derived from Europe? Will China break up in smaller states or will it seek to regain its past position as the civilisational centre in a world of tributaries? Big questions indeed.

Magnus Mörner's big question concerns the global role of Latin America. What are the historical characteristics of Latin America in a global comparative perspective? In a colonial context it is characterised by early European settlement and the decimation of its former inhabitants in what Niels Steensgaard has termed as perhaps the worst disaster in the history of mankind. The early date of the European colonisation meant that it was accompanied by ardent evangelisation and the institution of a "seigneurial organisation of society". The normative basis for the construction of the Latin American colonies was not the rational attitudes of the Enlightenment, but the mentalities of late medieval Europe. Thus Latin Americans had to go through the process of developing their own Enlightenment. Also in a colonial context, Latin America was characterised by early political independence. Like the USA the Latin American states gained independence long before most of the colonial states in Africa and Asia were even founded. Thus colonisers and colonised became one. Europeans, Amerindians and Africans intermarried, but the nations continued to be ruled by people of European culture. Thus it makes more sense to compare Latin America to Australia, New Zealand and North America than to include it in what used to be called the "Third World". A further characteristic of Latin America is its high level of urbanisation, with big cities constructed already at the onset of colonisation and receiving massive immigration in the 20th century. Latin America is one of the most urbanised areas of the world, and in addition one with a high level of social inequality. What Mörner finds most remarkable in more recent political history, is the fact that constitutional rule actually survived the severe economic problems of the 1980s.

In his essay, Bjørn Olav Utvik asks if Islamism is a reactionary fundamentalism of an anti-modern kind, or a force that promotes modernisation. With this question we return to the core areas of Erslev's classic historical world: the Middle East and Western Europe. In trying to give an answer Utvik makes an intriguing comparison with Oliver Cromwell's Puritans in pre-industrial England. Utvik here takes up a tradition from the Danish-Norwegian historian and comedy-writer Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754), who taught at the

University of Copenhagen during the early Enlightenment. Holberg discussed, from a utilitarian viewpoint, the question of Mahommed's and Cromwell's historical roles. To the rational Holberg nothing was worse than "blind Enthusiasm", i.e. a tendency to follow natural passions without reasoning. Luckily he found that neither Mahommed nor Cromwell was guilty of this crime. Holberg found traces in the Koran of a certain "subtlety" (under-fundighed) which convinced him that "if Mahommed were Fanaticus, then at least he was not a blind Enthusiast". Similarly, he concluded from his studies of English history that Cromwell belonged to "that kind of Enthusiasts who let Reason stay at the Helm, and who know how to control their fierce Passions so that something great can be begotten from them."<sup>11</sup> Now, whereas Holberg juxtaposed Cromwell to the Prophet Mohammed himself, Utvik is comparing Cromwell's Puritans to late 20th century Islamists.

Utvik's contention is that contemporary Islamism is part of the breakthrough for the "modern age" in Muslim societies. It is "Cromwell in the Middle East". 16th century Puritanism and 20th century Islamism share certain important traits which favour urbanisation, commercialisation and industrialisation, changes that, for lack of a better word, we call modernisation. Some of these traits are the idea of work as a vocation, a vigorous contempt for corruption in public life, and a principle of merit as the prime criterion for promotion. Both Puritans and Islamists have in addition contributed to modernisation by using modern political techniques: assemblies, mass petitions, group pressure, appeals to public opinion, associations built on individual membership. Both movements have been directed against the power of conservative clerics. They are not democratic, tolerant or liberal, but have focused their attention on the state, demanding purification of state laws. Thus one of the functions of these movements has been to make people identify with the state. This is nation-building. Utvik makes a difference between sounding modern and being modern, claiming that Islamists while sounding anti-modern are in fact a modernising force. Utvik also mentions the differences between Puritans and Islamists, and he says he does not want to slide back into obsolete theories of universal stages of

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11 Bull, Francis: *Ludvig Holberg som historiker*. Aschehoug, Kristiania 1913, 149, 171-2.

development that all societies must pass through. He takes care to define what he means by modernisation. Some may find it problematic to compare such vastly different entities across time and space, and to build the comparison on the dichotomy between modernity and tradition. But how else should one account for the striking parallels between 16th century Puritanism and 20th century Islamism?

## The Big in the Small

The big issues in the three last essays are cultural encounters, the concept of development, and the expansion of global communications. Each author approaches his big topic from the study of a particular case.

Niels Brimmes' case is located in the British trading colony of Madras in the early 18th century. He challenges the habitual idea of a dichotomy between a modern, powerful Europe and a traditional and passive non-European world. He paints the picture of a dynamic Indian society which draws British authorities into its conflicts through a process of dialogue. The particular conflict studied is that of the "right hand caste" and the "left hand caste" between 1707 and 1717. The study reveals a fluid, commercially advanced and highly competitive Indian society where the opposing factions are continuously positioning themselves in anticipation of British intervention. They place the British authorities in the position held by their local chiefs or kings in the precolonial period, and expect a similar behaviour. The British, however, are reluctant to intervene and have a hard time learning how to play their assigned role properly. Their role was not that of a dominant power consciously serving its commercial interests, but of a power vulnerable to social unrest likely to damage trade. Brimmes' essay is an eye-opener indeed.

Juhani Koponen's case is also colonial: Tanganyika 1884–1961 (today's mainland Tanzania). The peoples of Tanganyika are among those whom Erslev described as being without history because at Erslev's time, when Tanganyika passed through German into British hands, Europeans did not find it possible to discern from its past a "genuine development". Koponen is not primarily concerned with the history of the local people, but with the notion of development and its effects on colonial practices. Colonialism in Tanganyika, according to Koponen, was conceived of as a development project. This project

continued after decolonisation, one might add, on a multilateral basis. The development agencies of the Nordic countries have been particularly active in Tanzania, following in the footsteps of the German and British colonialists, and with hardly more success in terms of achieving development goals. Thus the whole of Tanganyika's long 20th century has been characterised by interaction with European developers of changing national brands. Koponen's essay is neither an apology for colonialism nor an attack on development aid, but a case for historical continuity.

What is development? The word can have many meanings. Koponen's notion of development is: an intentional intervention with a goal that also serves as an ideological justification. His notion also includes the processes resulting from the intervention. Koponen presents the German and British endeavours to construct railways and roads, establish plantations and estates, promote export-oriented agriculture, stimulate research, provide education, hospitals and dispensaries, and protect endangered natural resources. The Germans called this "Entwicklung". The British followed up, launching a massive drive just after the Second World War. Their basic motivations were utilitarian, not humanitarian. On this account they differ from post-independence Nordic developers. It remains to be established, however, what practical difference this makes. Before the Nordic agencies entered the scene, the British and their nationalist Tanzanian opponents had already developed a shared discourse of development that prevailed as a basis for planning in the post-colonial state.

Koponen further discusses who lost and who gained from colonial development. The colonial powers certainly lost, but there were individual colonizers on the winning side. The Tanganyikan side also had winners and losers. In Koponen's view it makes little sense to look at "Germany", "Britain" or "Tanganyika" as a whole when calculating gains and losses. One should rather look at state administrations, private groups, companies, and peasant households. On this basis Koponen comes up with a carefully worded plea for continued use of the unfashionable concept "underdevelopment" in the context of north-south relations, at least until we have a better word for interventions unleashing processes of change that only benefit the few.

In Brimmes' essay we meet a vibrant commercial city, in Koponen's a rather ill-fated economic development project. Economic history provides some of the most fertile ground for reflection and research about global issues. Within the field of economic history there is today

an expanding subfield of transnational business history, with a clearly global dimension. But this subfield has been surprisingly absent from the general debate about metahistory, historical synthesis, world and global history. It is high time for global historians to discover the important research undertaken by leading business historians such as Geoffrey Jones at the University of Reading. Several young Nordic historians are now being attracted to international networks working on the history of transnational corporations, cartels, trade and foreign investments.<sup>12</sup> This opens up a new world of files for exploration, but also new venues for discussion about shifting relations between states, international organisations and transnational corporations, all operating in the global marketplace. The economic historian Eli Heckscher (1879–1952) is the most prominent of the few 20th century Swedish historians who have deviated from the tradition of a highly specialised empiricism. Heckscher did his main studies on mercantilism, but as a passionate advocate of free trade he put forward the hypothesis that the comparative trading advantage of different countries is due to differences in productive factors. This idea, which resembles God's order as envisioned by Topelius, was expanded upon and later became the “Heckscher-Ohlin theory” in international economics. Heckscher was disappointed, of course, by the interwar failure to realise the free trade regime he had been hoping for. But this did not stop him from asking big questions about how economic means and human motivations relate to each other. In 1944 he asked how the Papal Church in the early medieval period could have been so forceful when the League of Nations in his own time was so weak. This contrast seemed to refute the most simplistic understandings of historical materialism, he claimed, since means of communication had been so little developed in the Middle Ages and were so much more effective after the First World War. Heckscher's main explanation was that the Papacy had allied itself with the greatest political force of its time: the Roman Empire, whereas the League of Nations had fallen victim to the vigorous nationalism of its constituent states.<sup>13</sup> Despite

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12 For a summary of historical perspectives on transnational corporations, see Jones, Geoffrey: *Transnational corporations – a historical perspective*. *Transnational Corporations and World Development*. Routledge on behalf of the UNCTAD Division on Transnational Corporations, London and Boston etc. 1996, 3-26.

13 Heckscher, Eli: *Historieupplåtning*. *Materialistisk och annan*. Bonniers, Stockholm 1944, 13ff.

its simplicity this argument shows that a revolution in communications does not by necessity produce political globalisation, not even in the long run. The world will not be politically united by the sheer expansion of communications. States must also want and have the force to unite.

In the last contribution to this volume, Kurt Jacobsen is turning Heckscher's argument around. Instead of asking about the impact of transnational communications on international institutions, Jacobsen asks how a small company from a small country in the northern periphery of Europe could fare so much better than the League of Nations in the same tumultuous period. GN Great Nordic has in fact been able to link continents and countries together telegraphically for more than 125 years despite nationalism, revolutions and wars. Kurt Jacobsen belongs to a nation who takes pride in being small. "Denmark is a little land 0 is the proudest and most humble thing a Dane can say. In Jacobsen's essay Denmark is as always a little land, but has big companies such as Carlsberg, ØK and GN Great Nordic. The files of the latter have been deposited at the Royal Library in Copenhagen and Jacobsen has been the first to explore them. GN Great Nordic, or the Great Northern Telegraph Company as it was called until 1986, is a true agent of globalisation. And, this is Jacobsen's main thesis, it has managed to survive as an international telecommunications company precisely because its leaders have been able to evoke Denmark's small and unthreatening size, in combination with a tradition for neutrality. Great Northern has operated without any domestic market. It has had nothing to do with Danish telecommunications. Its activities have all been abroad where they have been sustained by the needs of great powers to establish contacts which for various reasons they could not construct on their own. The Danish Kingdom needed a new link to Britain after its loss of Schleswig and Holstein. Britain needed a link to Russia which did not go through Prussia. Russia wanted someone else than the British to assist in building a trans-Siberian line. All external powers needed someone to ignore the anti-globalising attitude of the Beijing court and land a cable illegally in Shanghai. And Beijing in its turn needed help from someone other than the major powers to construct internal lines of communication in China. This went on all the way through two world wars and the cold one that followed, including the founding and the break-up of the Soviet Union which both opened new opportunities. (Admittedly, the Second World War was harmful to the company.)



GN Great Nordic has been a great agent of globalisation, but its very success may paradoxically undermine its existence. If the world becomes too open and the great powers too friendly there may no longer be a need for the great little globalisers of Copenhagen. If the worst should happen, it is comforting to know that the company's files are well preserved. The tale of GN Great Nordic is quintessential global history.

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It is our hope that the present volume will contribute to a higher Nordic profile in the rapidly evolving field of global history.