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Transnational History - Introduction

Pierre-Yves Saunier

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Introduction

But not only is it true that no country can be understood without taking account of all the past; it is also true that we cannot select a stretch of land and say we will limit our study to this land; for local history can only be understood in the light of the history of the world. There is unity as well as continuity. To know the history of contemporary Italy, we must know the history of contemporary France, of contemporary Germany. Each acts on each. Ideas, commodities even, refuse the bounds of a nation. All are inextricably connected, so that each is needed to explain the others. This is true especially of our modern world with its complex commerce and means of intellectual connection. In history, then, there is unity and continuity. Each age must be studied in the light of all the past; local history must be viewed in the light of world history.

This statement was not made in one of today's forums where the need for 'a global history for a globalised world' was preached. Neither was it uttered in a graduate seminar where enthusiast young historians present their first historical research, nor in the ever growing number of conferences and workshops where established scholars confront their work on ideas, commodities and other items on the move. Nor even during the last two decades when more and more historians tried to stretch the limits of their investigations and imaginations beyond the national casing. These words were pronounced in 1891 by the US historian Frederick Jackson Turner.¹ Only two years later, Turner would again tackle the topic of the significance of history and pronounce his famous 'frontier' hypothesis. It was to become one touchstone of the idea that the United States of America were on a special historical track, different from the other countries and to be narrated as such. The tension between a relational outlook and an insular national history was thus embodied in one person, a member of the generation that made history a discipline within the framework of the research based university.

The aforementioned tension is not specific to US historians. Other national contexts have their own Turners, who advocated the study of 'inextricable connections'. Karl Lamprecht in Germany, Henri Pirenne in Belgium, the Romanian Nicolae Iorga, Cheikh Anta Diop in Senegal or the Japanese Suzuki Shigetaka could be depicted in germane terms. History and its practitioners certainly have been part and parcel of the nation-building process in its different embodiments throughout the 20th century. They have gathered material, processed data and established narratives that took the national

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of History' in *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. Ray Allen Billington (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1961), pp.20-1.

framework as their frame and horizon. But the admittedly 'repressive connection between history of the nation',² this stream of linear history that has established the nation as the central and only subject of history, was never hegemonic. In the midst of the most nationalist historiographies, and albeit not always against their grain, some historians also pleaded for extending their gaze beyond, across and through nations. This tension never ceased to define the methodological and narrative keyboard that we historians have used for the researching, writing and teaching of history. Most of the keys play the notes of **methodological nationalism**, whereby historians explicitly or implicitly hum a tune where the country, aka the national state, appears as the natural form of organization of societies and the basic unit of historiography.³ But there is an alternative which rejects the autonomy of national histories as a fiction, and favours what lies between or through national societies and other units of historical analysis.⁴ In fact, does one necessarily oust the other? In the last two decades, we have simultaneously seen signs of re-nationalization of history, notably in the new countries that emerged from the breakdown of the Soviet Union and its Western belt, and a major overhaul of German and American history that went in the other direction. Here a substantial effort was made to understand how these national histories were shaped by outside forces, and how they had been a factor in historical developments beyond their borders. This is not to suggest the superiority of the transnational perspective: conceiving,

² Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, (Chicago, 1995), p.4.

³ Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick-Schiller, 'Methodological Nationalism and beyond: Nation-state Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,' *Global Networks*, 2: 4 (2002), pp. 301-34.

⁴ Michael Geyer, 'Historical Fictions of Autonomy and the Europeanization of National History' *Central European History* 22 :3/4 (1989), pp. 316-42.

researching and writing history of and in one country is still worthy of the historians' attention. What this book argues is that the transnational perspective eventually enhances this capacity as well as it makes it possible to write the history of entanglements between countries.

Transnational history is an approach that emphasise what works between and through the units that humans have set up to organize their collective life, rather than what has been happening within these units taken as **monads**. It is a relational approach that focuses on relations and formations, circulations and connections, between, across and through these units, and how they have been made, not made and unmade. To appraise its tentative nature, it needs to be remembered that the phrase 'transnational history' is still young and its definition remains fluid. Chapter 1 will replace this idea in the wider context of the social sciences, picture this diversity, and connect it to the trajectory of the term since its appearance in 1842. Just as 'transnational' as an adjective is being used to specify a certain class of phenomena, or a spatial level, or the identity of certain individuals and the characteristics of some organisations, the recent invasion of 'transnational history' in dissertation, book and article titles covers many different meanings. Some use the phrase abundantly and under several of these understandings, others are comfortable with other generic or specialized qualifications like universal, oceanic, world, comparative, connected, entangled, shared, cosmopolitan, symmetrical, translocal, international or cross-national history. The differences between these approaches are, in my view, less important than their common emphasis on relations. Let's start with the why, when and where of transnational history, in order to see what specific concerns and angles, if any, distinguish it from some of these other relational approaches.

Transnational History: what are the stakes ?

If we consider what historians do when researching and writing history with a transnational perspective, three things catch the eye. They are the 'big issues' transnational history attempts to address. First is the **historicisation** of contacts between communities, polities and societies. Here, the goal is to study how exchanges and interactions waxed and waned, to appraise the changing levels of exchange, integration and disintegration between the territorialized basic units of historical understanding (countries, regions, continents): an empirical answer to discussions on what is and when was 'globalisation'. Secondly, the transnational perspective acknowledges and assesses foreign contributions to the design, discussion and implementation of domestic features within communities, polities and societies; and vice versa the projection of domestic features into the foreign. The purpose is to thicken our understanding of self-contained entities like nations, regions, civilizations, cities, professional groups and religious communities by shedding light on their composite material. Thirdly, transnational history deals with trends, patterns, organisations and individuals that have been living in between and through these self contained entities that we use as units of historical research. Here we have an opportunity to recover the history of projects, individuals, groups, concepts, activities, processes and institutions they often have been invisible or at best peripheral to historians because they thrived in-between, across and through polities and societies. These three issues mark a difference between transnational history and **global history**. Global history, according to one official description of the eponym journal, deals with 'the main problems of global change over time, together with the

diverse histories of globalization'.⁵ Planetary change is not the gist of the above programme.

This problem oriented agenda underpins chapters 2 to 5 of this book. They build on a substantial body of scholarship, regardless of the badge it wears in book titles or key-word description, and not limited to the by-product of most recent scholarship. If the expression 'transnational history' is recent, its three fronts aroused the interest of a number of historians before the 1990s. By and large, the phrase 'transnational history' is a tad hyperbolic, and suggests a specialised sub-disciplinary field of validity that does not match the spirit of much of what is being written and researched as transnational history. The mindset is rather oriented towards openness and experimentation regarding the range of topics and methodologies.⁶ Take a look at the table of contents of the special issue of *The Journal of American History* in 1999.⁷ The contributors broached the environment, identities, migrations, the history of the discipline of history, the historiography of Black Americans emancipation, labour movement, social sciences, human rights, social and development policies, race and empire and showed how changes and patterns in US history were entangled with developments abroad, from Mexico to Italy via the Philippines. That's hardly a thematic domain, even less a sub-disciplinary brief. It may be appropriate here to think of what William

⁵ *Journal of Global History* page at

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=JGH> (accessed 15 december 2011).

⁶ Michael Geyer, review of Budde, Gunilla; Conrad, Sebastian; Janz, Oliver (Hrsg.): *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen 2006), in: H-Soz-u-Kult, <http://geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net/rezensionen/2006-4-032>, published 11 October 2006, accessed 24 january 2010.

⁷ *The Journal of American History*, 'The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History: A Special Issue', 86 : 3 (December 1999).

Cunningham once wrote about economic history '[it] is not so much the study of a special class of facts, as the study of all the facts of a nation's history from a special point of view'.⁸ Minus the reference to 'a nation's history', this book starts from here. 'All facts': transnational history can be tried on any topic, which does not mean it will be useful and relevant to each and everyone. 'Point of view': this is what transnational history claims to provide, with the idea that this special point of view will complete other points of view and not replace them. This is why I will often use the phrase 'history in a transnational perspective' to lessen the risk of the sub-disciplinary hubris suggested by 'transnational history', although the latter will be frequently used for its amenity to syntax. Likewise, my use of 'transnational historians' does not mean that we need yet another brand of historians: it is just shorter than 'historians who adopt a transnational perspective'.

The list of topics included in the *Journal of American History* is familiar to any social historian. Similar topics have been covered under many other labels, especially **comparative history** – or rather, the application of comparison between different national societies (cross-national comparative history, as it were). A major reference for historians who compare national histories is an article written in 1928 by the French historian Marc Bloch.⁹ Bloch's piece clearly included the concepts of 'filiation' and 'influence' between national societies and polities in the purview of comparative history. Yet, he did not single out the study of actual connections and circulations between countries as the 'most interesting' direction for comparing societies. Bloch expressed his preference for the comparison of countries without actual ties to one

⁸ William Cunningham, *Growth of english industry and commerce during the early and middle ages*, CUP, 1890, 2nd edition, vol 1, p.8

⁹ Marc Bloch, 'Pour une histoire comparée des civilisations européennes', *Revue de Synthèse*, XLVI (1928), pp.15-50.

another, a choice vetted by most of his explicit followers.¹⁰ Still, it is the way comparison between national histories has developed, not the way it was conceived, that has created some distinction between the comparison of the historical fate of countries without actual ties to one another, and the study of the processes and elements that were the substance of such actual ties. This early divergence would come back with a vengeance in European historiography, during the skirmishes between comparative history and *Transfersgeschichte* in the 1990s. Comparative history, it was argued, had paid an excessive tribute to national histories.¹¹ It had erected countries as the basic unit for researching and writing history, at the expense of regional or other units, and paid no interest to actual historical relations between and through countries. *Transfersgeschichte*, it was rejoined, cared for the small stuff of history with its focus on cultural products such as ideas or books: it had nothing to say on major social and political changes in European history.¹² This debate subsided, and most now share the argument that both approaches can be combined with profit because they help to answer different questions.¹³ This provided the basis for empirical attempts to

¹⁰ Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford, Calif., 2008).

¹¹ Michel Espagne 'Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle', *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire*, 17: 1 (1994), p. 112 – 21.

¹² Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, eds, *Geschichte und Vergleich: Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt a.M., 1996), p.10.

¹³ Johannes Paulmann, 'Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer. Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 267 (1998), p. 649-85.

combine the two approaches,¹⁴ and historians who compare nations and historians who study connections and circulations between nations have been able to confront their respective angles more productively.¹⁵ This helped to whet the distinctions as to the role of comparison in comparative history and in the history of cultural and other transfers. In comparative history, comparison is the tool historians use to compare different historical trajectories –mostly national-, in search of structural causalities for broad processes and patterns that will explain discrete national historical trajectories, their differences, their similarities. For those who work in between and through national histories, comparison is the tool used in the past by historical actors themselves, when they engineered similarities and differences in order to create particular historical trajectories for their polities and communities. In her study of reciprocal observations between French views of American style and American views of French fashion, Nancy Green called this 'interactive comparative history', the study of 'reciprocal visions'.¹⁶ In fact, transnational historians don't shirk comparison between different locations, if only because they have to understand what happens to the ties and flows they follow through different polities and communities. But to them comparison is a topic of study more than a tool for the study of other topics.

When was transnational history ?

¹⁴ Christof Mauch & Kiran Klaus Patel, eds, *The United States and Germany since 1890 During the Twentieth Century. Conflict, Competition, Convergence* (Cambridge, 2010), ed. or. in German (2008).

¹⁵ Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor, eds, *Comparison and History. Europe in Cross-national Perspective* (London: 2004).

¹⁶ Nancy L Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work: a Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC, 1997).

To follow and reconstruct the operation and impact of entanglements across and through societies, polities and communities, historians can direct their attention to the 5000 years span since the establishments of literate and agricultural societies. Or to the 8 million years since the date of the first known fossil of hominids: after all, it was through circulation that hominids dispersed from Africa to the whole planet. Closer to us in time we are instances of outstanding historians who have studied exchanges, contacts, persons, patterns or conjunctures that existed between, across and through polities and societies between 200 BCE and the end of the 18th century CE. Jerry Bentley, Fernand Braudel, Sanjay Subrahmanyam or Nathalie Zemon Davis have thus covered wide chronological chunks.¹⁷ Some historians have no qualms about placing these or other works under the label of transnational history, or to deploy the notion of transnational history for early modern Europe.¹⁸ Starting from the *natio* as the group of people born within one and the same community, they stress that it belongs to historians to retrace entanglements between these nations, even if they were not the nations of more recent times, where the coalescence of state and nation-building processes gave birth to territorial bounded units with a drive for homogeneity. Conversely, other historians argue that, when it comes to periodisation, one should restrict application of the label 'transnational

¹⁷ Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-modern Times* (New York, 1993); Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* (London, 1981-84), 3 volumes, Ed. or. in French 1979; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in connected history*, (Delhi, 2005), two volumes.

¹⁸ Martin Krieger, 'Transnationalität in vernationaler Zeit? Ein Plädoyer für eine erweiterte Gesellschaftsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 30 : 1 (2004), pp. 125-36; Angeles Redondo and Bartolomé Yun Casalilla 'Localism, Global History and Transnational History. A Reflection from the Historian of Early Modern Europe', *Historisk Tidskrift*, 127: 4 (2007), pp. 659-78.

history' to the moment when national states began to crystallize. For 20th century historian Kiran Patel, using the term 'transnational history' for the Greek polis, China under the Tang dynasty or the Carolingian kings adds little value: 'who speaks about transnationalism for these times, is either using an anachronistic fashion label or introduces, by the back door, an essentialist understanding of nation that the transnational perspective wants to avoid'.¹⁹ This book starts from a germane position : transnational history is the chronological peninsula of a wider body of scholarship, firmly connected to it but with distinct contours. It is in continuity with the research of historians who have been anxious to investigate the entanglements between polities, societies and communities since the dawn of human kind. It has especially close links with the idea of 'connected histories' that Sanjay Subrahmanyam elaborated in the 1990s, drawing on previous work by Joseph Fletcher, in order to deal with large issues (conjunctures, empires) through the study of specific antagonistic encounters between different polities of Eurasia 'from the Tagus to the Ganges' between the 15th and 18th century.²⁰ But it is also a specific stretch of that research because it deals with a moment where polities, societies and communities were increasingly defined or pounded by the idea and practice of the national state as a bounded territorial unit where authorities strove for inside homogeneity and outside projection of prestige and power, and where exclusive loyalty of citizens was required in exchange of rights. This 'age of territoriality', argues Charles Maier, took shape during the 17th century, came of age in the Age of Revolutions and crystallized in the middle of the 19th century.²¹ Intertwined state and nation building

¹⁹ Kiran Klaus Patel, 'Überlegungen zu einer transnationalen Geschichte', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 52 (2004), p.634.

²⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'On the Window that was Asia', in idem, *Explorations*, vol.1 pp.1-17.

²¹ Charles S. Maier, 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative

processes, manifested in the control of bordered space and the ordering of the society within that space, were seen or imposed as the one best way for communities and societies to create polities endowed with sovereignty. Since the beginning of the 19th century, humans have been increasingly living in a world organised by this idea and practice of the national state. True, some analysts have diagnosed a withering of nation and states in the recent decades. In that text, Maier himself diagnoses a weakening congruence between identity space and decision space since the 1960s, and elsewhere sociologist Saskia Sassen deftly assesses the disassembling of territory, authority and rights that characterised the 1980s.²² Yet, as she points out, the formidable combination known as the 'nation-state' is still the most widely spread and meaningful kind of polity on this planet. One may add that part of the grip of the national state resulted from the resistance or accommodation it triggered during its uneven and resistible ascension. Other kinds of communities, territorial (city states) or not (class or religious affiliation), also had their thinkers and supporters: in the name of the *Umma*, the community of Muslim believers, the very idea of the nation was contested by a range of scholars, activists and intellectuals, resulting in conflicting waves of digestion into nationalism and commitments to the unity of Islam.²³ Even where the national state was not endemic, peoples, authorities and intellectuals took a stance in its regard if only because it was 'hawked upon'

Narratives for the Modern Era', *The American Historical Review*, 105: 3 (2000), especially p.817-822.

²² Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights : from Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, 2006). Subsequently, Maier indicated that, in his eyes, territoriality was once more on the rise.

²³ James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-states* (Cambridge, 1986).

them by European expansion.²⁴ It does not mean that those who aspired to create a new independent national state always abided to its most rabid territorial aspects, as witnessed by the changing geographies of Latin American independence struggle under Bolivar, or by ‘deterritorialised’ Indian patriotism.²⁵ Neither should we conclude that the national state monopolised the imagination of those who strived to create or maintain a community: the transatlantic religious community of Candomble, the Djedji/Jeje nation, ‘came about before the “classical” age of nationalism and has endured well beyond it’, reminds James Lorand Matory.²⁶ The non-territorial Djedji nation was coeval with empires and national states, and to a large part these different kinds of community ‘subsidised’ one another as they provided economic, linguistic or personnel resource for their mutual installation or maintenance. This coequality is a crucial point for transnational historians.

This uneven and resistible success of the territorial and homogenising national state charts the chronological scope of transnational history: the last two hundred years, cut large, biting into the late 18th century and with a sharper mark from the middle of the 19th century. By confronting the national state in its high point, we can study how interdependencies and interconnections unfolded within, against or beyond the roadblocks and incentives that derived from-nationally produced orders. We can also assess the composite nature of the nation and the state, against their self-narratives of autonomous production. It is the pretension of the national state to be the one best way

²⁴ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in an Age of Global Imperialism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), p.280.

²⁵ About the national conceptions of the likes of M.N Roy or Rabindranath Tagore, see Kris Manjappa, *M. N. Roy : Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi, 2010), chap. 1 and 3 and Sugata Bose, *A Hundred*, chap. 6.

²⁶ James Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion. Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Rise of the Afro-Brazilian Candomble* (Princeton, 2005), p.111.

to organise polities and societies that gives us a chance to research and write about how this came or failed to be, through the definition of antagonistic economic or cultural national styles, appropriations of political thought, mutual support between nationalist movements or public policy transfers. The homogenization bend of the nation-state led to attempts to control, rebut or eradicate flows, ties and formations across borders, while its capacity to project power entailed projects to nurture and orient them, if only to increase or protect what was defined as 'national'. The result is a bonanza of documentary evidence about the life between and through nations, with the bias that it has been gathered by authorities, agencies or individuals who 'saw like a state'.²⁷ But it is this material which, in the last instance, allows us to observe what stretched between locations and across polities in the last 200-250 years.

This chronological scope underlines differences with other approaches that participate of a relational approach. Especially since its consolidation in the 1960s, **world history** has the most ambitious goal of writing the history of humankind.²⁸ Some of its practitioners like David Christian have ratcheted it up, and his '**Big History**' starts with the inanimate universe and the possible Big-Bang.²⁹ Nonetheless, what goes as world history usually deals with the last 5000 years, and most of the production focuses on smaller but still considerable fractions of these. **Global history**, as an attempt to establish the different and changing forms of integration and convergence at the planetary level, ploughs the last 500 years, charting the

²⁷ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State : how Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*, (New Haven, 1998).

²⁸ Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History. Historians Create a Global Past* (New York, 2003).

²⁹ David Christian, *Maps of Time: an Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, 2004).

course of globalization since the world was circumnavigated.³⁰ The transnational perspective has a much shorter range, even if it ought to acknowledge previous trends and patterns. Obviously, the circulation of goods, ideas, capital and persons did not start in the last 200 years or so, and many developments in this late period happened within and against existing patterns. If we want to appraise what the development of national states and their ideals of external projection and territorial homogeneity introduced as constraints and possibilities regarding the direction, content and orientation of these flows, we need to consider their previous deployment and structure. Historians of science have shown the importance of straddling the 18th and 19th century, for instance.³¹ The periodisation of transnational history is also flexible.

The focus on the moment of growing ubiquity of nation and state building processes does not amount to a new ontological certification of nations as indivisible **monads**. However, rattling the weight of the national casing should not cause the denying of nations as **realised categories**, which have contributed so importantly to the framing of our individual and collective lives. We would lose our capacity to understand the presence of the past in the present if we write systematically without or versus the nation.

Transnational historians need to think ‘with and through’ the nation, in order to do justice to this ‘inadequate and indispensable category’, as persuasively argued by the historian of British imperialism Antoinette

³⁰ Despite its open interest for articles dealing with earlier periods, the recently created *Journal of Global History* has mostly attracted articles dealing with the post-15th century period.

³¹ Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, James Delbourgo, eds, *The Brokered World : Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820* (Sagamore Beach, 2009).

Burton.³² Transnational history, then, is a perspective available to all historians of the last 200 years or so, whose research project entails to research and write a history with nations that is not a history of nations.

Where is transnational history ?

Does this chronological scope bound the analytical capacity of transnational history to certain places and spaces ? Chapter 6, which opens the methodological toolkit of transnational history, will delve on the issue of spatiality, but three preliminary issues need to be confronted right now. Does transnational history only studies large scale processes ? Is it only preoccupied with enmeshments where nations are the basic unit ? Is transnational history just applicable to places where the coalescence of nation and state-building produced bounded and ordered sovereign territories?

A positive answer to the last question would seem to limit the reach of transnational history: during the first half of the 19th century, polities organised and conceived as national states were chiefly taking shape in Europe and the Americas. Yet, the impact of the national project was strongly felt beyond this Atlantic core well before the national state became the political best seller of the modern age through the waves of nation and state building that electrified Africa and Asia following World War II.³³ On the one hand, the colonial projection of European nations ‘hawked the nation state’ upon distant lands through the establishment of settlements where

³² Antoinette Burton, ‘On the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation’, in *ibid*, ed, *After the Imperial Turn : Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham NC, 2003), pp. 1-23.

³³ Paul H. Kratoska ‘Elites and the Construction of the Nation in Southeast Asia’, in Jost Dülffer and Marc Frey, eds, *Elites and decolonization in the twentieth century* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp.36-55.

indigenous populations were kept out of the national community of settlers, with a deep impact on how the idea of national citizenship developed as a Manichean project in both colonial and metropolitan settings.³⁴ On the other hand, the idea of the national state became the horizon for emancipation and independence movements in areas well before polities were organised on national lines, beginning with Haiti in the very late 18th century. European nationalist and republican figures like the Italian Mazzini generated a follow up well beyond his native land and region.³⁵ Early in the 19th century, Caribbeans and Americans black Christian missionaries played a central role in the establishment of national definitions in Liberia or Sierra Leone, and in the prospect of an African nation.³⁶ How much this formed the background for the attempts to create a free state on the Gold Coast in the 1860s (the Fante Federation) is still hypothetical, but the national state was a political project in Cameroon after World War One, well before the African independencies, and pan-africanism flourished under Claude McKay and Marcus Garvey in the 1920s.³⁷ Similarly, the Indian Ocean was criss crossed

³⁴ See John R. Chávez, *Beyond Nations: Evolving Homelands in the North Atlantic World, 1400-2000* (New York, 2009) especially chap.4-7; Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire : Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late Victorian Britain*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1998.

³⁵ C.A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini, eds, *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism 1830-1920* (Oxford, 2008).

³⁶ Robin Law, 'Constructing a Real National History: A Comparison of Edward Blyden and Samuel Johnson', in P.F. de Moraes Farias & Karin Barber (eds.), *Self-Assertion and Brokerage : Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham, 1990), p.78-100.

³⁷ Verkijika G. Fanzo, 'The latent Struggle for Identity and Autonomy in the Southern Cameroons 1916-1946' in Ian Fowler and Verkijika G. Fanzo, eds, *Encounter, Transformation and Identity : Peoples of the Western Cameroon Borderlands, 1891-2000* (New York , 2009), pp.141-150. Roderick D. Bush, *The End of White World*

by nationalist ideas, anti-imperialist activists and anti-colonial propaganda material between the different territories ruled by the British.³⁸ Even in regions where nations were absent in their territorial garb, the idea of the nation was present in political, social, religious and cultural life. Besides, without being conceived as nation-states, different polities moved towards greater inside homogeneity within a neatly defined territory in the early 19th century. In the Ottoman Empire, in Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Nezam's Iran or Muhammad Ali's Egypt, governments established programs for political reform in the domains of taxation, education and the military, and pushed towards a stronger homogeneity within the country.³⁹ This created new constraints and opportunities for circulations and connections. It is not only where national states crystallised earlier, in the Atlantic world, that an history 'with and trough' the nation is relevant and possible.

Now about the kind of spaces transnational history works with and about. We start from the premise that the national state came to organise the world polities and societies in the last 200 years. But, because it leads historians to follow flows, watch ties, and reconstruct formations and relations between, across and through nations, the transnational perspective puts pressure on the nation as the basic unit for researching and writing history, from below

Supremacy, Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line (Philadelphia, 2009) ; Michelle Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914 to 1962* (Durham NC, 2005).

³⁸ Mark Frost 'Wider Opportunities: Religious Revival, Nationalist Awakening and the Global Dimension in Colombo, 1870-1920' *Modern Asian Studies*, 36 : 4 (2002), p. 937-67.

³⁹Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, 2008), chap. 4, Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe. Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy* (Berkeley,1997), chaps.3 and 4, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali* (Cambridge, 1984).

and from above. The transnational perspective not only discloses nations as embedded into webs of interactions with other nations, but it also ‘brings to the surface subnational histories of various kinds’.⁴⁰ When one maps trajectories of migrants, they do not ‘start’ from a country, but from a specific place like a city, a village, a region, a kin group.⁴¹ Similarly, public policies that are observed, emulated and labelled in national terms by their supporters or opponents have often been experimented by local authorities, not by national ones.⁴² The same would apply to know-how, ideas and capital: detailed study of flows, ties and formations lead historians to question national tags and to re-affiliate circulations and connections to specific spatial or social segments, groups and institutions within the national apparatus. In order to deal with these sub-national or non-national elements, some historians to propose the notion of **translocality** for its capacity to identify entanglements that do not involve countries, especially in regions where the national state was a late comer.⁴³ On the other hand, researching flows, ties and formations across national units gives access to larger formations. Under that guise, the transnational perspective draws from **borderland studies** or

⁴⁰ Arif Dirlik, ‘Performing the World: Reality and Representation in the Making of World Histor(ies)’, 16: 4 (2005) *Journal of World History*, pp.406-407.

⁴¹ James T. Watson, *Emigration and the Chinese lineage : the Man in Hong Kong and London* (Berkeley, 1975); Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Land of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914* (Ithaca, 1999) ; Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Copenhagen, 2003).

⁴² Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings : Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge Mass., 1998).

⁴³ Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen, eds, *Translocality: the Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective* (Leiden, 2010).

the thriving research on oceanic basins as areas of dense interactions.⁴⁴ But it can also contribute to recover some forgotten zones like the Sahara, to reformulate our knowledge of 'Europe', or to reveal unexpected formations that do not match the identified regions of **area studies**, like the mutual interest of Japanese and Ottoman intellectuals and governments.⁴⁵ Thus, paradoxically, the growing salience of nations in the last 200 years or so is a wedge to access circulations and connections between other types of polities, societies and communities. Empires, city-states, sub-national regions, villages, ethnic groups, regional basins of exchange and markets still contributed to organise human activity. But they all were framed by the nation-state and its by-products such as citizen's rights and duties, social policies, currencies, language, lifestyles, allegiances, legislations, cultural foreign policy or colonial expansion. Accordingly, when we chase interactions, circulations, constellations and interactions between and through nations with our historical butterfly net set on transnational mode, we also place ourselves in the capacity to capture the flows, ties and formations that have worked across, between and through other kinds of units, beginning with infranational and supranational territorial units.

⁴⁴ Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Elliott Young, 'Transnationalizing Borderlands History', *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 41:1 (2010), pp. 26-53 ; Isabel Hofmeyr, (2007) 'The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South - Literary and Cultural Perspectives', *Social Dynamics*, 33: 2, (2007), pp. 3-32.

⁴⁵ See respectively Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails. Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth Century Western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009); Alexander Badenoch & Andreas Fickers, eds, *Materializing Europe Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe* (Basingstoke, 2010); Selçuk Esenbel, *Japan, Turkey and the World of Islam: The Writings of Selcuk Esenbel* (Folkestone , 2009).

The third spatial point that needs clarification is the scope of investigations bequeathed by a transnational perspective. There are indeed some connections and circulations that unfurl in the long distance. Benedict Anderson follows the revolutionary connections that started starting from the improbable link between Filipino nationalists and the anarchist movement in Paris, Brussels and Barcelona.⁴⁶ His journey with José Rizal, Isabelo de Los Reyes and Mariano Ponce also leads him to far away nodes of activism, exile and intrigue in Havana, Singapore, Tokyo, Yokohama. Quite a ride. But transnational history does not necessarily boils down to long distance moves and far flung circuits. The complex relations of observation, emulation and rivalry between artists, officials, and intellectuals of China and Japan, France and Germany, USA and Mexico, were played out on relatively limited maps.⁴⁷ The history of Palestine as a crucible of the Palestinian and Jewish peoples certainly has long distance dimensions, but it dramatically plays out on a very small tract of land.⁴⁸ The everyday life of borders across the globe has been one of smugglers or commuting workers who did not travel to distant places

⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags. Anarchism and the Anticolonial Imagination* (London, 2005).

⁴⁷ Joshua A. Fogel, *Articulating the Sinosphere: Sino-Japanese relations in space and time* (Cambridge Mass, 2009), especially parts 2 and 3 and Shogo Suzuki, 'The importance of "Othering" in China's national identity: Sino-Japanese relations as a stage of identity conflicts', *The Pacific Review*, 20: 1 (2007), pp. 23-47; Michel Espagne et Michael Werner, eds, *Transferts. Les relations intellectuelles dans l'espace franco-allemand* (Paris , 1988); 'Rethinking History and the Nation-State: Mexico and the United States as a Case Study. A Special Issue', *Journal of American History*, 86: 2 (1999).

⁴⁸ Gudrun Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton , 2008).

but moved goods, earnings and lifestyles on small distances.⁴⁹ The Gotthard Tunnel, just 15 kilometres of tracks opened under the Alps in 1882, became an icon of Swiss national identity and a bulwark for Swiss territorial integrity. But it was also the by-product of an internationalised capital, know-how and workforce, and became a central axis for trade and tourism between North Western Europe and Northern Italy.⁵⁰ By and large, transnational historians can keep in mind Donald Wright's attempt to tie the 'small place' of Niumi (Gambia) within larger systems. Because of the specialization of the Niumi region in large-scale peanut culture and exportation, a detailed account of its daily life and society since the late 19th century inevitably calls to the fore its location within the imperial economy of commodities and migrations.⁵¹ This interest for short or medium range circulations, small and singular places, is the third answer to the question of where is transnational history.

Conclusion

Adopting a transnational perspective has a lot to do with other relational approaches to history. It is historiographically connected with them and fosters investigations that expand beyond national units. Yet, there are also significant differences of complementary nature : transnational history is not written against or without nations but it simultaneously pays attention to

⁴⁹ Alain Tarrus, *La mondialisation par le bas. Les nouveaux nomades de l'économie souterraine* (Paris, 2002); Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asia Frontier, 1865-1915* (Singapore, 2007).

⁵⁰ Judith Schueler, *Materialising Identity. The Co-construction of the Gotthard Railway and Swiss National Identity* (Amsterdam, 2008).

⁵¹ Donald R. Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niumi, The Gambia* (Armonk, 2004), ed. or 1997, chap. 4-8.

what lives against, between and through them; it limits itself to the last two hundred years broadly understood; it works across the boards in regard to spaces, scales and topics. This book does not want to crystallise such distinctions or to tighten the definition of what transnational history should and should not be. It is rather intended as a vade mecum that tries to convey the range of what historians, and social scientists interested in history, have been doing when researching and writing a history that contribute to answer the 'big issues' that were stated at the beginning of this introduction. The flag under which they marched is treated as a secondary variable.

As any guide should, the first chapter maps the place in more details, and account for the itineraries of 'transnational' as a notion. The 4 core chapters of the book are dedicated to elements which study helps to capture the content, operation and impact of entanglements between polities, societies and communities: connections, circulations, relations and formations. The first two have a panoramic purpose, and their framework is meant to make readers think about other topics, places and moments. Chapter 2 is dedicated to connections and offers an overview of linkages created by human individuals and organizations, and by non human intermediaries. Chapter 3 focuses on the flows that these linkages impeded or favoured, and insists on manners to specify their content, direction, extent and intensity. In the next two chapters, the analytical view yields to a synthetic angle, with a focus on selected instances for deeper examination. Chapter 4 places the emphasis on relations that emerge from connections and circulations, and the way protagonists are changed by this participation. With chapter 5, we turn to the different formations that generate and are generated by circulations and connections. The last chapter returns on some methodological issues lurk throughout the preceding chapters. All along the way, I will try to draw from a range of moments, topics and regions, but with no intention or illusion to

cover the field comprehensively or without bias. After all, a guide is meant to arouse curiosity for a different country, not to mirror it.

