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Science and Global History, 1750–1850: Local Encounters and Global Circulation

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Science and Global History, 1750-1850

Local Encounters and Global Circulation

The period 1750-1850 witnessed crucial changes on a global scale, and has been referred to in a number of ways. Some speak of the “age of revolutions”, others of the “great divergence”, the “industrial enlightenment”, or the “imperial meridian”.¹ How are we to reconcile the various events and transitions covered by these labels, whose examination up until now has too often been parcelled out to a number of relatively autonomous sub-disciplines?

In the past few years, both “old big pictures” (often structured by Eurocentrism) and visions of cultural oppositions have begun giving way to new narratives of global history. The history of science, however, has yet to be well integrated with such narratives. It continues to be seen as either a field apart, as though science is somehow insulated from its context, or as a field that documents the spread of science as either a source of global development or as a manifestation and tool of western culture. Like other historical sub-disciplines, though, the history of science has witnessed challenges to a dominant master narrative based on faith in cultural notions of universality and progress. Recently, attempts have been made to show that, rather than simply being a source of progress or tool of western domination, science is a dynamically co-evolutionary product of the encounters between representatives of various cultures.

The essays that follow belong to this genre of history writing. But they go beyond examining the history of science as concerned with local encounters and global circulation. By critically deploying terms such as “contact zone” and “circulation”, these essays are meant to demonstrate the way in which the history of science is and should be integrated as a co-productive element of the broader discipline of global history. The first essay, by Lissa Roberts, situates this goal by tracing the closely related ways in which the history of science and history more generally have been conceived, written and taught since the turn of the twentieth century, especially in the Anglo-American world. This proves to be a story that is as often about contemporary ideologies and worldviews as about uncovering the past.

Elizabeth Green Musselman charts the path of observational statements made by various witnesses of a meteor at South Africa in 1838 as they made their way into the records of august institutions such as the Royal Society in London. Her point is to reveal how the testimony of local natives and uneducated settlers remained embedded in the discourse and records of metropolitan science. Andreas Weber tells a similar story in that he follows the path traversed by natural knowledge from

its collection in the Dutch East Indies through its arrival in Europe. What is especially striking is that his case brings together the worlds of Dutch colonial administrative policies and European science, revealing their productive inter-penetration.

Not all contact zones during this era were characterised by encounters between European settlers and non-urbanised locals, as Juan Pimentel shows in his study of the entwined histories of science and nation-building in Mexico. His protagonist is a Creole savant whose astronomical and archaeological investigations helped fix Mexico's global position, both geographically and culturally. Finally, Stéphane Van Damme and Antonella Romano suggest how we might replace a historical map of the world configured around European metropolises as centres of (scientific) production and consumption with a map populated by world cities which were both locally productive contact zones and nodes in global networks of knowledge production and circulation. They make their case with particular reference to 1550-1750, thereby setting the scene for cases such as Pimentel's.

There is certainly still much work to be done before we understand the world that the period 1750-1850 wrought. Our hope is that these essays help stimulate a greater integration of the history of science and global history in the continuation of that task.

Lissa Roberts, 27 January 2009

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Note

- 1 For the "age of revolutions" see Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolutions*; Langley, *The Americas*; Cunningham and Williams, "De-centring the 'Big Picture'"; Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena*; and Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*.