

Editorial

Writing the history of containers – national, regional, or continental – looks rather outdated today. World and global histories search for connections between societies and for common features that characterize the development of such societies. But this exercise proves difficult for many reasons. One of them is a very practical challenge: to master the necessary languages to access both sources and specialized literature for more than a few societies quickly reaches its limits. Collective work of specialists with different regional expertise has become the attractive modus to overcome this difficulty. Another challenge is the fact that connections not only increase in number but also overlap and become confusing the larger the timespan investigated. A solution to this problem seems to be a focus on single years or decades. Consequently, the number of books dealing with “global years” and combing secondary literature for as many regions as possible to discover the links between them for a specific twelve-month period has increased since global history has become à la mode.

This often goes hand in hand with the assumption that this particular year is a caesura for more than one society and world region while revealing broader transformation of, for example, the international system – as is the case with the Seven Years’ War as the opening of the Anglo-French competition for worldwide hegemony or with the two world wars of the twentieth century – or major revolutions – such as the American, the French, or the Russian ones in 1776, 1789, and 1917 respectively. A similar point of no return has obviously been 1989 as the end of a short twentieth century or the end of the Cold War. But other authors relativize the character of such a punctual caesura and use the concept of the “global year” to undermine the importance of another year. Such an approach occurred with studies on 1979 – with the parallel challenge to the two superpowers’ hegemony by the Iranian revolution and the Mujahedin in Afghanistan as well as by the election of the Polish pope and the opening of China’s economy – which is presented as similarly decisive as 1989.

For those who are not satisfied with the singular focus on one year, the next scale is obviously the decade. Once again, the growing number of books and even series addressing global change as taking place over a period of less than a dozen years demonstrates that such a framing also allows for productive cross-cultural studies. While the study of a year unquestionably privileges events over structures and processes, the decade as a preferred framework invites a more balanced view on events. This view uncovers the process of gaining global importance, which often only happens in retrospective when the departing processes become transparent for more than a few places and when we get access to material that allows the significance attributed to those events to be measured by the contemporaries and the first cohort of commentators. Only from this perspective are we able to apply a semi-constructivist approach to global moments. Such moments obviously do not exist per se – but they are full of potential to be seen as such. But this potential has to be realized before we can call them global moments. Neither natural catastrophes nor pandemics and neither wars nor sensational technological innovations intrinsically constitute global moments. Actors are needed that make these moments important by loading them with meaning beyond the individual facts, therefore anchoring them in collective consciousness and memory.

Investigating a decade and its meaning for a world region, as is the case here with the sixties and Africa, contributes to a better understanding of such processes. It does not mean that it is a global moment, but it may be a moment full of potential to be absorbed into the collective memory of Africans, of pan-Africanists all over the world, of those seeking decolonization and independence, or of those interested in the establishment of new transregional ties or the new ways of integrating a region into world economy. But underlining the potential of a moment of global importance also invites a rethinking of the processes of forgetting. In the light of later development, the original powerful interpretation loses attractiveness or is consciously overwritten by other interpretations. Political independence has not led to economic sovereignty – the dreams connected to decolonization are in conflict with the ongoing neglect of recognition. Evidently, these traumata work on the collective perception of the sixties and have led to remembrance that differs from the original enthusiasm. But while a potential meaning has not necessarily materialized, the mechanism works the other way around as well: the meaning attributed to a historical period in the following decades can change later on again. Insofar, historiographical reconstruction, as provided in this thematic issue, is an invitation to reconsider the narratives that have become powerful.

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