

# Rethinking Cross-border Connections: A Personal Account

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Andreas Greiner, Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş, and Mario Peters introduced this thematic *Forum on Rethinking Cross-border Connections* from an institutional perspective. They recounted how the German Historical Institute Washington – an established institution with a clearly defined research focus – started to embed its own transatlantic research interests within a broader framework of the history of global connectivity and exchange. They highlighted the historiographical insights that this new alignment brought and then showed how at some point the framework needed to be readjusted in order to allow for the study of ruptures, breakdowns, and disconnections as well. The institutional perspective is highly instructive as it echoes some of the larger transformations occurring in historical research in general at the time. And it reminds us how established research interests and practices can constantly be reflected and reframed without losing their core purpose; how they actually gain in topicality and helpfulness in the process. At the close of this issue, let me complement the institutional narrative from a personal, non-

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generalizable perspective with a little story that traces my own journey from researching global connectivity to emphasizing elements of disconnection.

As is often the case in our profession, it all started with an archive trip. Porthcurno is a small village at the western tip of Cornwall. Getting there requires a bit of effort. The train from London to Penzance takes at least five hours, if all goes well. From the Penzance railway station there are hourly buses to Porthcurno. The fifteen-kilometer ride takes another 45 minutes. Alternatively, one can hire a taxi. Bus and taxi alike go as far as a car park, from which it is a five-minute walk down the village main street to Porthcurno beach (a stunning place which in itself is already worth the effort of the journey). However, Porthcurno is not only remote in terms of transportation. Once you are there, you might find it difficult to pick up a cell phone signal. For a long time, the mobile reception in the village was notoriously weak. While this might have changed in the last years, it was certainly still the case when I was visiting in spring 2011. It was a popular joke among the locals that one must climb one of the surrounding hills for decent reception.

Though an old joke, it always worked and made people smile – because its legendary remoteness is only part of Porthcurno's story. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the village stood at the very center of the world's largest communication network. Due to its location and topographical qualities, Porthcurno became the landing site for an important telegraphic connection between Great Britain and British India. The cable link went online in 1870 and was immensely successful. Many other global cable connections out of Porthcurno followed, and this little place in western Cornwall soon developed into the world's most important cable station. At its peak, 14 telegraph cables with traffic from all over the globe landed at Porthcurno. For about half a century, it was the world's communications hub. This is why the old joke about the mobile reception still works.

And it is also why Porthcurno seems a fitting place to start a story about global disconnectivity. It was the reason why I visited Porthcurno in 2011. Though the village is no longer a global communications hub, it is the home of the Porthcurno Telegraph Museum which hosts the archive of the telegraph company once operating at Porthcurno. The archive is an inevitable port of call for anyone working on a book about the global telegraph network, as I was then. After a few days combing through the holdings, the head archivist pointed me to a particular file that he thought could be interesting for me. He was right. The file contained color copies of three lengthy letters written between March 1914 and January 1915 by an unnamed telegrapher stationed on Fanning Island in the Pacific and posted to a friend in Canada. These letters first got me interested in the relationship of global connection and disconnection.

<sup>1</sup> Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Doing Global History. An Introduction in Six Concepts* (London, 2020), Ch. 3.

Fanning Island is a small atoll situated around 1450 kilometers south of Hawai'i in the middle of the Pacific. From 1889 it was part of the British Empire. Beginning in 1902, the island came to be used as a relay station in the first trans-Pacific telegraph connection, effectively closing the last major gap in the global telegraph network at the dawn of the twentieth century. And yet, the unnamed telegrapher's letters do not really speak about global connectivity. On the contrary, they make the remoteness, the isolation from the rest of the world that the writer and his colleagues were experiencing on Fanning Island and in which the telegraphers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often performed their duties, palpable across generations.

The letters speak about dysfunctional postal connections, recurring food rationing or the experience of being trapped on the island after the outbreak of the First World War while an enemy German cruiser was fast approaching. I have presented and discussed these and other examples of global disconnection described in the letters elsewhere and will not go into detail here.<sup>1</sup> Back at the Porthcurno archives, however,

<sup>2</sup> Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World. The Telegraph and Globalization* (Cambridge, 2013).

I could not immediately see the larger significance of these disconnections and their interplay with the central position that Fanning had in the global telegraph network of the early twentieth century. That Porthcurno itself had held a not entirely different position about which the locals were still joking seems particularly interesting in retrospect. Still, I think I was not prepared to acknowledge the role that disconnections play in processes of globalization. At the time, I was finalizing a book manuscript that was later published under the title *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the letters from Fanning and their disconnection contents did not make it into the book.

*Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World* examined the emergence of a global telegraph network – an infrastructure that connected actors and institutions all over the globe in entirely new ways. While I tried to critically engage with the notion of connection and sought to relativize some of the bolder metaphors such as “the shrinking of the world” or the “annihilation of space and time,” it was and remains a book about global connectivity. As such it fit rather neatly into global history’s broader narrative at the time, a narrative fixated on the significance of global exchanges and entanglements. In the last decade, however, this has fundamentally changed. Reflecting the larger political, social and economic transformations that we have recently been witnessing, global historians have started to rethink the field’s key assumptions.

Princeton historian Jeremy Adelman was among the first to remind global historians to critically reflect their own positionality in the broader context of researching processes of globalization. Adelman made his argument under the impression of developments such as the 2016 presidential elections in the United States or the Brexit vote in Great Britain. He was concerned that due to the liberal, cosmopolitan background of most academics in the field, global history “favoured stories about curiosity towards distant neighbours,” might “over-

look nearby neighbourhoods dissolved by transnational supply chains,” and forget “the left behind, the ones who cannot move, and those who become immobilised because the light no longer shines on them.”<sup>3</sup>

While controversial at the time, Adelman’s claims seem almost tame from today’s perspective. Too much has happened in the past half-decade. The Trump administration left a trail of destruction across America’s democracy. Brexit has been done – with severe repercussions for Britain’s democracy, its supermarket shelves, and the European Union’s political stability. In early 2020, a global pandemic of hitherto unimaginable magnitude brought travel bans, supply chain disruptions, and mass lay-offs that are still crippling numerous sections of the economy. In February 2022, Russia invaded the Ukraine. Months of brutal warfare did not only bring death and suffering to countless people, but also stopped a good part of the global trade in wheat and fundamentally called into question the current global energy regime.

These developments brought a term to the fore that had been lurking in the background of academic writing for some time: deglobalization. Under the impression of the above-mentioned phenomena, many politicians, journalists, and researchers started to wonder whether we were in fact entering a phase of deglobalization, an era of first stopped and then reversed global integration in which the economic and social entanglements of the past were gradually undone. Currently, we are witnessing this question turning into an assertion. Contemporary observers are thereby reproducing an argument that some historians – often from the field of economic history – have for some time been making about the interwar period and the Great Depression, a time during which commercial integration and trade volumes were much lower than in the nineteenth century or in the postwar years.<sup>4</sup> Such interpretations assess globalization primarily in terms of global trade, the integration of global markets, and price convergence. In their view, periods of retrogressive integration or

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Adelman, “What Is Global History Now?” *Aeon* (blog). March 2, 2017. <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>.

<sup>4</sup> See Jeffrey G. Williamson, “Globalization, Convergence, and History.” *The Journal of Economic History* 56, no. 2 (2001): 277–306; Harold James, *The End of Globalization. Lessons from the Great Depression* (Cambridge, Mass./London, 2001); Maurice Obstfeld and Alan M. Taylor, “The Great Depression as a Watershed: International Capital Mobility over the Long Run,” in *The Defining Moment. The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael D. Bordo, Claudia Goldin, and Eugene N. White (Chicago/London, 1998), 353–402.

**5** Stefan Link, "How Might 21st-Century De-Globalization Unfold? Some Historical Reflections." *New Global Studies* 12, no. 3 (2018): 343–65, here 344.

**6** Kiran K. Patel, *The New Deal. A Global History* (Princeton/Oxford, 2016).

**7** Madeleine Herren, *Internationale Organisationen Seit 1865. Eine Globalgeschichte Der Internationalen Ordnung* (Darmstadt, 2009); Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms. A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge, 2017).

**8** Daniel Hedinger, *Die Achse. Berlin-Rom-Tokio 1919-1946* (München, 2021); Maria Framke, *Delhi-Rom-Berlin. Die Indische Wahrnehmung von Faschismus Und Nationalsozialismus 1922-1939* (Darmstadt, 2013).

**9** Zoltán Biedermann, "(Dis)Connected History and the Multiple Narratives of Global Early Modernity," *Modern Philology* 119, no. 1 (2021): 13–32, here 25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/714972>.

even deglobalization follow periods of intensive globalization like a pendulum.<sup>5</sup>

Both Adelman's 2017 piece and the increasing interest in a concept such as deglobalization point to the ongoing shift in focus occurring in the field of global history. Its understanding of global connectivity has already significantly broadened and disruptive phenomena increasingly come into focus. However, the field's general conception of globalization is still surprisingly simple and binary. For instance, when economic history points to halts and reversals in processes of global economic integration as proof of deglobalization, it builds on an overly narrow understanding of the history of the interwar years. The fact that the global economic crisis of the late 1920s and 30s propagated outward from the USA to soon grip the entire world is in itself a strong indication of the degree of global integration at the time. The global history of crisis management techniques,<sup>6</sup> the simultaneous proliferation of international organizations,<sup>7</sup> and the global dissemination of fascist thought are further examples.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, when Adelman warns that focusing attention on the connected simultaneously leaves the unconnected in the dark, he is reinforcing the very same dichotomy between connection and disconnection that we see in the relationship between globalization and deglobalization described above. Both point to an effectively binary conception of globalization.

In reality though, connective and disconnective processes are deeply interwoven and interreact intensively. The actors and places of globalization are themselves always embedded in connective and disconnective circumstances simultaneously,<sup>9</sup> and they must be studied in that state of tension. Connections and non-connections converge in particular places and in the lived experiences of historical actors, revealing their significance in their interrelations. Although I could not immediately see it back in Porthcurno, the letters from Fanning made this very clear to me over the last

years. They point to a rather pronounced confluence of global connectivity and disconnectivity. On the remote atoll of Fanning, British telegraphers were among the first to learn about world news and distributed them further. But when it came to communicating with their families or to any form of physical movement, they were confined to the island. The letters make it very clear how this interplay shaped the telegraphers' lifeworld, how the global telegraph network connected and disconnected at the same time.

There are other examples for the same phenomenon. The Suez Canal, an emblematic piece of global infrastructure in the nineteenth century, is another prominent case in point. When the canal opened in 1869, it greatly facilitated and shortened the journey between Europe and Asia. But it was also a place where connective and disconnective phenomena converged and collided in several ways. The canal did not merely connect the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, inaugurating a new sea route of global significance; it also bisected ancient caravan routes, requiring travelers and camels to wait for gaps in sea traffic so they could ferry across the canal.<sup>10</sup>

The global telegraph network and the Suez Canal provide just two examples of how global infrastructures that have generally been interpreted as connectors and facilitators of globalization actually occupy much more complicated roles in the fabric of globalization. Obviously, they connect and disconnect at the same time and shape processes of globalization based on this very interplay between connectivity and disconnectivity. This interplay is a complex and hitherto understudied dynamic. So far, we do not have enough studies that look at globalization in a way that visualizes both its connective and disconnective qualities. This is why the present volume is so important to get the ball rolling and propagate a much more illuminating perspective on cross-border connections and the processes of globalization that they carry.

<sup>10</sup> Valeska Huber, "Multiple Mobilities. Über Den Umgang mit verschiedenen Mobilitätsformen um 1900," *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft* 36, no. 2 (2010): 317–41, here 340; Valeska Huber, "Connecting Colonial Seas: The 'International Colonisation' of Port Said and the Suez Canal during and after the First World War," *European Review of History* 19, no. 1 (2012): 141–61.

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