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# Transnational History

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**Theory and History**

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ISBN 978-1-4039-8526-X hardback

ISBN 978-0-333-91921-1 paperback

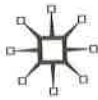
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First published 2013 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-0-230-27184-5 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-230-27185-2 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Univerzita Karlova v Praze  
Knihovna společenských věd  
Praha 5 - Jinonice



# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Preface</i>  | vii       |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i>   | viii      |
| <b>Introduction</b>   | <b>1</b>  |
| Transnational history: what are the stakes?                                       | 3         |
| When was transnational history?   | 5         |
| Where is transnational history?   | 9         |
| Conclusion  | 11        |
| <b>1 Meanings and Usages</b>  | <b>13</b> |
| <i>Fin de siècle</i> or the transnational <i>zeitgeist</i> in the social sciences | 13        |
| Looking backwards: 'transnational' at 170 years                                   | 17        |
| Modern history before transnational history                                       | 22        |
| Modern historians go transnational  | 26        |
| Conclusion  | 31        |
| <b>2 Connections</b>  | <b>33</b> |
| Human-made connections  | 35        |
| Non-human connections   | 46        |
| Conclusion  | 57        |
| <b>3 Circulations</b>   | <b>58</b> |
| Looking for order in the space of flows   | 59        |
| Caveat: circulation beyond mere motion  | 62        |
| Guideline 1: know your riverbed   | 65        |
| Guideline 2: demarcate a catchment area   | 67        |
| Guideline 3: identify your tributaries  | 70        |
| Guideline 4: where there are slopes, there are flows                              | 73        |
| Guideline 5: pin the blame on regime makers                                       | 76        |
| Conclusion  | 78        |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>4 Relations</b>                                    | <b>80</b>  |
| Characterising relations                              | 80         |
| Dedication  | 82         |
| Domination  | 86         |
| Mobilisation  | 89         |
| Alignment   | 92         |
| Conclusion  | 97         |
| <b>5 Formations</b>                                   | <b>99</b>  |
| The self  | 100        |
| The organisation                                      | 103        |
| The topical region                                    | 106        |
| The event   | 108        |
| The territory   | 112        |
| Conclusion  | 116        |
| <b>6 On Methodology</b>                               | <b>117</b> |
| Stretching our spatial imagination                    | 118        |
| Methodological inspirations                           | 121        |
| Methodological ecumenism and methodological positions | 123        |
| In the toolbox of transnational history               | 126        |
| Sources: invention, creative destruction, recycling   | 130        |
| Conclusion  | 134        |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                                     | <b>135</b> |
| Time, manner and place                                | 136        |
| The glass ceilings of transnational history           | 138        |
| More later  | 140        |
| <i>Notes</i>  | 142        |
| <i>Glossary</i>                                       | 178        |
| <i>Further reading</i>                                | 181        |
| <i>Index</i>  | 187        |

# Preface

Paradoxically, it is not easy to write an introduction to a field of scholarship when it has only recently been defined as a particular branch of study. There are no canonical theoretical strands, no agreed list of seminal books, roll-call of consecrated key authors, or compendia of seasoned methods accumulated by decades of scholarship to be quietly rehearsed. This is the first dilemma for the author who does not want to set in stone an 'authorised' version of this field while it is still in the making. I have addressed this difficulty by showing the diversity of transnational history, although I have been confined by my own ignorance on many topics, regions or moments.

A second dilemma also derives from the relatively recent crystallisation of transnational history. On the one hand, this makes it necessary to cover the widest possible range of concerns and situations that have been explored; on the other, one needs to find or construct a framework to live up to the introductory mission of this book. The most obvious of these frameworks seemed impractical at best, or counterproductive at worst. An organisation of contents by historical subdisciplines (economic, cultural, international relations history ...), regions (South Asia, Americas ...), topics (migrations, technologies, commodities ...), categories (class, gender, race ...), historiographical stages or major concepts was considered and rejected. Instead, the core of the volume has been composed within a 'notional' framework, based on key concerns that can help historians to research and write history in a transnational perspective.

The result is not a book which limits the definition of what transnational history should or should not be. It is merely a guide, the validity of which is conditional on the rapid change of the landscape it purports to describe, analyse and domesticate.

# 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 enthusiastic 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 was it written in the last two decades, when more and more historians have tried to stretch the limits of their investigations and imaginations beyond the restrictions of the merely national. These words were pronounced in 1891 by the US historian Frederick Jackson Turner.<sup>1</sup> 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 a touchstone of the idea that the United States of America was a country on a special historical track, different from other countries' trajectories, 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 similar terms. In some scholarly communities, like that of the orientalist, the study of interactions between civilisations was on the official agenda of international conferences as early as the late 1880s.<sup>2</sup> History and its practitioners certainly have been part and parcel of the nation-building process in its different embodiments throughout the twentieth century. They have gathered material, processed data and established narratives that took the national framework as their frame and horizon. But the admittedly 'repressive connection between history and the nation',<sup>3</sup> that this stream of linear history established, placing the nation as the central and only subject of history, was never hegemonic:

In the midst of the most nationalist historiographies, and not always against their grain, some historians also made the case to extend 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 produce a tune in which the country, aka the national state, appears as the natural form of organisation of societies and the basic unit of historiography.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> In fact, does one necessarily out the other? In the last two decades, we have simultaneously seen signs of renationalisation 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, researching and writing history of and in one country is still worthy of the historian's attention. In regard to national historiography, what this book argues is that the transnational perspective enhances its capacity by adding the history of entanglements between countries to the checklist of national history writing.

This can happen because transnational history is an approach that emphasises what works between and through the units that humans have set up to organise their collective life. This contrasts with an emphasis on what has been happening within these units taken as **monads**. It is an 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 reposition this idea in the wider context of the social sciences, demonstrate this diversity, and connect it to the trajectory of the term since its appearance in 1842. Just as 'transnational' as an adjective is often indiscriminately 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 specialised 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 us 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, politics 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 territorialised basic units of historical understanding (countries, regions, continents): an empirical answer to questions of 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, politics 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, civilisations, 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 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 that often have been invisible or at best peripheral to historians because they thrived in between, across and through politics and societies. These three issues mark a difference between transnational history and **global history**. Global history, according to one official description of the eponymous journal, deals with 'the main problems of global change over time, together with the diverse histories of globalization'.<sup>6</sup> Planetary change is certainly part of, but not the whole of the above programme.

This problem-oriented agenda underpins Chapters 2–5 of this book. They build on a substantial body of scholarship, regardless of the badge it wears in book titles or keyword 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. And, the phrase 'transnational history' is hyperbolic, suggesting a specialised interdisciplinary field in ways that do not match the spirit of much of what is being written and researched under that title. Rather, the mindset is oriented towards openness and experimentation regarding the range of topics and methodologies.<sup>7</sup> Consider the table of contents of the special issue of *The Journal of American History* in 1999.<sup>8</sup> The contributors broached the environment, identities, migrations, the history of the discipline of history, the historiography of black Americans' emancipation, the 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 is hardly a thematic domain, even less a disciplinary brief.

It may be appropriate here to think of what William 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'.<sup>9</sup> Minus the reference to 'a nation's history', this book starts from here. 'All facts': transnational history can be applied to any topic, which does not mean it will be useful and relevant to each and every one. '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 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.<sup>10</sup> Bloch's piece clearly included instances of 'filiation' and 'influence' between national societies and politics in the purview of comparative history. Yet he did not single out the study of such actual connections and circulations between countries as the 'most interesting' direction for comparing societies. Bloch expressed a preference for the comparison of countries that had no actual ties to one another, a choice vetted by most of his explicit followers.<sup>11</sup> Thus, 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 return 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.<sup>12</sup> It had accepted countries as the basic unit for researching and writing history, at the expense of regional or other units, and had no interest in 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.<sup>13</sup>

This debate subsided, and most now share the argument that both approaches can be combined with profit because they help to answer different questions.<sup>14</sup> This provided the basis for empirical attempts to combine the two approaches,<sup>15</sup> and historians who compare nations and historians who study connections and circulations between nations have been able to confront their respective angles more productively.<sup>16</sup> This helped to sharpen 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 evaluate different historical courses – mostly national – in search of structural causes 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 politics 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'.<sup>17</sup> In fact, transnational historians do not shirk comparison between different locations, if only because they have to understand what happens to the ties and flows they follow through different politics and communities. But to them comparison is a topic of study more than a tool for the study of topics.

### ► When was transnational history?

To follow and reconstruct the operation and impact of entanglements across and through societies, politics and communities, historians can direct their attention to the 5000-year span since the establishment of literate and agricultural societies. Or to the eight 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 are instances of exchanges, contacts, persons, patterns or conjunctures that existed between, across and through politics and societies between 200 BCE and the end of the eighteenth century CE. Historians like Jerry Bentley, Fernand Braudel, Sanjay Subrahmanyam or Victor Lieberman

have thus surveyed wide chronological vistas.<sup>18</sup> Some historians have no qualms about placing works by these and other writers under the label of transnational history, or deploying the notion of transnational history for early modern Europe.<sup>19</sup> Starting from the *natio* as the group of people born within one and the same community, they stress that it is the duty of historians to trace 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 territorially bounded units with an impulse for homogeneity. Conversely, other historians argue that, when it comes to periodisation, one should restrict application of the label 'transnational history' to the moment when national states began to crystallise. For twentieth-century historian Kiran Patel, using the term 'transnational history' for the Greek *polis*, China under the Tang dynasty or Europe under 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'.<sup>20</sup>

This book starts from a similar 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. Whether they name their quest 'global', 'world', 'connected' or 'translocal' history is secondary. A close relationship exists between all these. For instance, transnational history has especially close links with the idea of '**connected histories**' that Sanjay Subrahmanyam, drawing on previous work by Joseph Fletcher, elaborated in the 1990s in order to deal with large issues (conjunctures, empires) through the study of specific confrontations between different polities of Eurasia 'from the Tagus to the Ganges' between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> But it is also a specific stretch of such connected histories because it deals with a moment when polities, societies and communities were increasingly defined or battered by the idea and practice of the national state as a bounded territorial unit in which authorities strove for internal homogeneity and external projection of prestige and power, and where the exclusive loyalty of citizens was required in exchange for civil rights. This 'age of territoriality', argues Charles Maier, took shape during the seventeenth century, came of age in the Age of Revolutions and crystallised in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Intertwined state- and nation-building processes, manifested in the control of bordered space and the ordering of the society within that space, were seen or imposed as the single best way for communities and societies to create polities endowed with sovereignty.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, humans have increasingly been living in a world organised by the idea and practice of the national state. True,

some analysts have diagnosed a withering of nations and states in recent decades. In his text, Maier himself diagnoses a weakening congruence between identity-space and decision-space since the 1960s, and elsewhere sociologist Saskia Sassen assesses the disassembling of territory, authority and rights that characterised the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> 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 the 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 absorption into nationalism and commitment to the unity of Islam.<sup>24</sup> Even where the national state was not endemic, peoples, authorities and intellectuals took up a stance towards it, if only because European expansion 'hawked the nation state in the world as one of its prized export communities'.<sup>25</sup> It does not mean that those who aspired to create a new independent national state always abided with its most rabid territorial aspects, as witnessed by the changing geographies of the Latin American independence struggle under Bolívar, or by 'deterritorialised' Indian patriotism.<sup>26</sup> 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 Candomblé, the Djedji/Jeje nation, 'came about before the "classical" age of nationalism and has endured well beyond it', James Lorand Matory reminds us.<sup>27</sup> The non-territorial Djedji nation was coeval with empires and national states, and in a large part these different kinds of community 'subsidised' one another as they provided economic, linguistic or personnel resources for their mutual installation or maintenance. This coevality is a crucial point for transnational historians.

The uneven and resistible success of the territorial and homogenising national state charts the chronological scope of transnational history: the last 200 years cut large, biting into the late eighteenth century and with a sharper mark from the middle of the nineteenth. By confronting the national state at 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. The pretension of the national state to be the single best way to organise polities and societies 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 impulse for homogeneity of the national 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 countries, with the bias that it has been gathered by authorities, agencies or individuals who 'saw like a state'.<sup>28</sup> But it is this material which, in the last instance, allows us to observe what stretched between locations and across politics.

This chronological scope showcases differences with related approaches that participate in a relational approach to history. Especially since its consolidation in the 1960s, **world history** has had the most ambitious goal of writing the history of humankind.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, what is generally accepted as world history usually deals with the last 5000 years, and most activity focuses on smaller but still considerable fractions of this. **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 course of globalisation since the world was circumnavigated.<sup>31</sup> The transnational perspective has a much shorter range, even if it ought to acknowledge previous historical trends and patterns. Obviously, the circulation of goods, ideas, capital and people did not start in the age of national states, 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 for the direction, content and orientation of these flows, we need to consider the previous deployment and structure of the latter. Historians of science have shown the importance of straddling the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for instance.<sup>32</sup> The periodisation of transnational history, as a result, is not fixed.

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 systematically write 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 argued by Antoinette Burton, the historian of British imperialism.<sup>33</sup> Transnational history, then, is a perspective available to all historians of the last 200-250 years, whose research project entails researching and writing a history with nations that is not a history of nations.

## ► Where is transnational history?

Does this chronological scope bind the analytical capacity of transnational history to certain places and spaces? Chapter 6, which opens the methodological toolkit of transnational history, will delve into the issue of spatiality, but three preliminary issues need to be confronted first. Does transnational history only study large-scale processes? Is it only preoccupied with enmeshments where nations are the basic unit? Is transnational history only 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 late eighteenth century and even in the first half of the nineteenth 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 the Second World War.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, the colonial projection of European nations foisted the nation state upon distant lands by means of the establishment of settlements where indigenous populations were kept out of the national community of settlers, with a consequent deep impact on the way in which the idea of national citizenship developed as a Manichean project in both colonial and metropolitan settings.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the idea of the national state set the destination for emancipation and independence movements in areas where polities were not yet organised on national lines, beginning with Haiti in the late eighteenth century. European nationalist and republican figures like the Italian Mazzini generated a storm well beyond their native land and region.<sup>36</sup> Early in the nineteenth century, Caribbean and American black Christian missionaries played a central role in the establishment of national definitions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and in the prospect of an African nation.<sup>37</sup> 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 the First World War, well before the African independence struggles, and pan-Africanism as a national project for Africa flourished under Claude McKay and Marcus Garvey in the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, nationalist ideas, anti-imperialist activists and anti-colonial propaganda material criss-crossed the Indian Ocean between territories ruled by the British.<sup>39</sup> Even in regions where nations were absent in their territorial manifestation, the *idea* of the national state was present in political, social, religious and cultural life. Moreover, without being conceived as national states, different polities moved towards greater internal homogeneity within a neatly defined territory in the early nineteenth century. In the Ottoman Empire, in Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Nezam's Iran or Muhammad Ali's Egypt, governments established programmes for



political reform in the domains of taxation, education and the military, and pushed towards a stronger cultural uniformity within the country.<sup>40</sup> This created new constraints and opportunities for circulations and connections. It is not only where national states crystallised earlier, in the Atlantic world, that a history 'with and through' the nation is relevant, needed and possible.

Now we move to the kind of spaces transnational history works with and about. We started from the premise that the national state came to organise polities and societies in the last 200-250 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 great strain on the nation as the basic unit for researching and writing history, from below and from above. The transnational perspective not only reveals nations as embedded in webs of interactions with other nations, but it also 'brings to the surface subnational histories of various kinds'.<sup>41</sup> When one maps the movement of migrants, they do not 'start' from a country, but from a specific place like a city, a village, a region, a kin group.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, public policies that are observed, emulated and labelled in national terms by their supporters or opponents have often been experimented with by local authorities, not by national ones.<sup>43</sup> The same applies to know-how, ideas and capital: detailed study of flows, ties and formations leads historians to question national tags and to reaffiliate circulations and connections to specific spatial or social segments, groups and institutions under the national umbrella. In order to deal with these subnational or non-national elements, some historians have proposed the notion of **translocality** for the capacity to identify entanglements that do not involve countries, especially in regions where the national state was a latecomer.<sup>44</sup> That is also my understanding of transnational history. On the other hand, researching flows, ties and formations across national units gives access to larger formations. In that guise, the transnational perspective draws from **borderland studies** and the thriving research on oceanic basins as areas of dense interactions.<sup>45</sup> But it also contributes to recovering 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**, such as the mutual interest of Japanese and Ottoman intellectuals and governments.<sup>46</sup> Thus, paradoxically, the growing salience of nations in the last 200 years or so is a wedge to open up access to circulations and connections between other types of polities, societies and communities. Empires, city-states, subnational regions, villages, ethnic groups, regional basins of exchange and markets still contributed to organising human activity. But they all were framed by the national state and its homogenising by-products such as citizens' rights and duties, social policies, currencies, language, lifestyles, allegiances, legislations, cultural foreign policy or colonial expansion. Accordingly, when we examine interactions, circulations, constellations and interactions between and through nations with our historical

camera set on transnational mode, we also put ourselves in position 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.

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 over a longer distance. Benedict Anderson follows the revolutionary connections that started from the improbable link between Filipino nationalists and the anarchist movement in Paris, Brussels and Barcelona.<sup>47</sup> His journey with José Rizal, Isabelo de Los Reyes and Mariano Ponce also leads him to faraway nodes of activism, exile and intrigue in Havana, Singapore, Tokyo and Yokohama. Quite a ride. But transnational history does not necessarily boil 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, took place on relatively limited maps.<sup>48</sup> The history of Palestine as a crucible of the Palestinian and Jewish peoples certainly has long-distance dimensions, but it has dramatically played out on a very small tract of land.<sup>49</sup> The everyday life of borders across the globe has been one of smugglers or commuting workers who did not travel to distant places but moved goods, earnings and lifestyles over short distances.<sup>50</sup> The Gotthard Tunnel, just 15 kilometres of track 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.<sup>51</sup> By and large, transnational historians can keep in mind Donald Wright's successful attempt to tie the 'small place' of Niimi (Gambia) within larger systems. Because of the specialisation of the Niimi region in large-scale peanut culture and exportation, a detailed account of its daily life and society since the late nineteenth century inevitably brings to the fore its location within the imperial economy of commodities and migrations.<sup>52</sup> This interest in combining the big-picture view with the study of short- or medium-range circulations, of 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 a complementary nature: transnational history is not written against or without nations but simultaneously pays attention to what lives against, between and through them; it limits itself to the last 200-250 years broadly understood; it

works across the board in regard to spaces, scales and topics. This book does not aim to crystallise such distinctions or tighten the definition of what transnational history should or 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 contributes to the answering of the 'big issues' that were outlined at the beginning of this introduction. The flag under which they march is treated as a secondary variable.

As any guide should, the first chapter maps the territory in more detail, and accounts for the itineraries of 'transnational' as a notion. The four core chapters of the book are dedicated to specific notions, the study of which helps to capture the content, operation and impact of entanglements between politics, 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 than the ones they are more familiar with. Chapter 2 is dedicated to connections, and offers an overview of linkages created by human individuals and organisations, 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 to some methodological issues lurking 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 of covering the field comprehensively or without bias. After all, a guide is meant to arouse curiosity about a different country, not to mirror the latter.

# 1 Meanings and Usages

In 2005, the American social scientist Gustavo Cano presented a substantial report on the meanings and usages of the terms 'transnationalism' and 'transnational' among US scholars.<sup>1</sup> He identified a start in the late 1990s, with premises as early as 1979. Building on the *Social Science Abstract Database*, Cano captured a sharp and durable rise after 1993, and illustrated the situation across the arc of the social sciences and humanities by looking for subject keywords such as 'transnational communities', 'transnational links', 'transnational migration/migrant issues' and 'transnational spaces' in publications in anthropology, economics, history, law, political science, migration studies and sociology. Cano's account locates the term only in the US, and only in the last 30 years or so. It would be tempting to conclude that transnational history is a recent fad, with history trailing behind the social science disciplines, and the community of historians throughout the world adopting another passing fashion picked up from US campuses. This chapter will complicate this view. Starting with an account of the recent success of the transnational approach in the social sciences, it explores 170 years of lay and scholarly usage of 'transnational' and its derivatives. Subsequently, it focuses on the discipline of history, with special attention paid to the way in which some historians had adopted a transnational perspective well before the phrase 'transnational history' was minted. This will lead us to finally consider why and how modern historians have increasingly adopted a transnational perspective in the last 20 years, and to assess the several agendas that are encapsulated in transnational history. Gustavo Cano rightly points out that 'transnationalism' was a 'generous' term: its use by social scientists and historians does not belie such a statement.

## ► *Fin de siècle* or the transnational *zeitgeist* in the social sciences

In the late twentieth century, the different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities were assailed by pressing requests to shake off their predominant concern for what was happening in territories shaped by the national state. In a present that was characterised as the age of **globalisation**, such concern was increasingly