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## SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM

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**Andrea Giardina**

Honorary President of ICHS

Born in New Delhi on 21 May 1961, Sanjay Subrahmanyam earned his PhD in Economics in 1987 with a dissertation on economic history at the University of Delhi. The first part of his working career was spent teaching economic history and comparative economic development at the same institution, where he was eventually named professor of Economic History (1993-95). From 1995 to 2002, he was Directeur d'études at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris, where he focused on the economic and social history of early modern India and the Indian Ocean world. In 2002, he was appointed as the first holder of the newly created Chair in Indian History and Culture at the University of Oxford. This extremely high-level international curriculum continued in 2004 at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he achieved further marks of distinction, serving from 2005 to 2011 as founding Director of UCLA's Center for India and South Asia, and from 2014 as Distinguished Professor of History and Irving & Jean Stone Chair in Social Sciences. He teaches courses at UCLA on medieval and early modern South Asian and Indian Ocean history, the history of European expansion, the comparative history of early modern empires, and various aspects of world history.

He also maintains an ongoing connection with the Collège de France, where he held the Chair in Early Modern Global History in 2013-2014, and has since continued to lecture as long-term invited professor, and, from 2017, as holder of the 'Chaire internationale' for the same discipline.

Subrahmanyam is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2009), and corresponding fellow of the British Academy (2016). In 2012, he was awarded the Infosys Humanities Prize, in 2018 the Prix Martine Aublet, and in 2019

the Dan David Prize for History. He holds honorary doctorates from the University of Calcutta (2015) and the Université Catholique de Louvain (2017).

The early part of his career, before his move to Europe and then the United States, was dedicated to the study of the economic and political history of India and the Portuguese empire between 1500 and 1700. His output at the time, in addition to dozens of review articles and chapters in edited books, included at least four books: *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1650* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1990); *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka-period Tamil Nadu* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992, with V. Narayana Rao and D. Shulman); *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History* (London-New York Longman, 1993).

Already in this early period, his numerous co-authored and co-edited books and papers testify to a characteristic feature of Subrahmanyam's scholarly modus operandi, one that recurs across the full arc of his career: a pronounced inclination toward collaborative projects that grow out of intellectual exchanges and the exploration of troves of previously unknown or underexploited sources. Among the two or three inspirations for his work as an historian, Subrahmanyam has cited, first of all, "affinity and friendship:" "A lot of my work is done in the context of collaboration, and this is the chemistry that motivates me. I talk constantly to my friends and collaborators, and have an enormous telephone bill every month. Collaborative work also provides some kind of real check of quality." This way of writing history has provoked criticisms from historians convinced that sole authorship is an unimpeachable achievement, and its absence a grave deficiency. The riposte of Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam – in the course of a lively debate about the volume *Textures of Time* (more on this later) – represents of a model of intellectual solidarity: "It is one more reason for us to return to the fray and also to promote the cause – still so unfashionable in history – of collaboration and joint authorship. The author is not dead; he or she may now have been reincarnated with three heads instead of one" ("History and Theory" 46, 2007, p. 427). It is a message of liberation: historians' polyphony, or polyvocality, can be a higher form of expression than monody, above all when the topic of research presents particularly elevated levels of difficulty and novelty.

During the course of his rise to eminence among the most distinguished and influential historians of our era, Subrahmanyam has constantly broadened the horizons of his research, adding various new subjects to the economic history with which he began: political history, social history, cultural history, historiography, history of mentalities as well as literature and art. In all his works, boundless versatility and curiosity are coupled with a high degree of intellectual coherence. It would, however, be a mistake to view Subrahmanyam's 'Passage to Europe' as a moment of rupture in his intellectual trajectory, both because the brand of economic history he practiced in Indian universities was always receptive to the contributions of political and cultural history, and because the new avenues he has explored in the second part of his career have never led him to abandon the interests of his younger, formative years in India.

Subrahmanyam has not written autobiographically, but does willingly speak of himself. While the historical community continues eagerly to hope for an autobiography, he has often been approached by colleagues and journalists and has never shrunk from dialogue or from answering the most varied questions. The ensemble of material available online includes much valuable testimony that helps to illustrate his place in contemporary historiography. Importantly, his comments reveal, implicitly and explicitly, a self-portrait colored most strongly by shades of continuity. Indeed, those wishing to understand the personality of this protagonist on the contemporary intellectual stage should take care not to overlook the complexity and fertility of the connections that link the historian and professor of Oxford, Paris and Los Angeles with his native land (cf. in particular his *Leçons Indiennes. Itinéraires d'un historien, Delhi-Lisbonne-Paris-Los Angeles*, Paris, Alma éditeur, 2015). Subrahmanyam does not have two homelands, one of which is sentimental and the other "dramatic" (in the manner of a Cicero), but rather two homelands where intense intellectual activity reigns, and where he exercises in equal measure his creativity as an historian, his critical faculties, his genial anti-conformism.

This last point deserves further attention insofar as it relates to the mistaken impression that Subrahmanyam is one of the many faces of the "intellectual diaspora" movement. The fact is that he actually left India rather late relative to many of his colleagues (around the age of 35), and has never ceased to be active in the country of his birth, publishing in journals, participating in research projects, and maintaining

an active rapport with younger scholars. Perhaps one of the keys to Subrahmanyam's success should be located in the ways in which he has inhabited the spaces of Western academia: as a fully-integrated participant, a celebrated and admired pioneer in the study of world history on the one hand, and on the other as an incompletely acculturated foreigner. The fact of his never having been fully acculturated to Western society from an early age has turned out to be what we might call a happy accident: "I still find," Subrahmanyam said in 2015, "many of the conventions (that other intellectuals from India working in US universities accept easily) quite detestable, including the ghetto mentality of many of the Indian intellectuals themselves, and the obsession with the politics of ethnicity." These characteristic features of his intellectual formation have allowed Subrahmanyam to propose an original reconsideration of the tradition within which notions of "global history" developed, and to frame the long, slow evolution of such history as a minority phenomenon, a kind of *Oppositionswissenschaft*. Subrahmanyam refuses to claim any sort of dominant role for the methodologies he himself employs. Even while declaring his discomfort with identifying himself as an historian of India, of Portugal, of Great Britain or of the Low Countries, he has affirmed his profound conviction that his way of doing history will never supplant histories conceived on a regional, national or continental scale: "Je suis également convaincu que l'on peut même trouver de nouvelles synergies en combinant ces variétés d'histoire sous le même toit" (*Aux origines de l'histoire globale. Leçon inaugurale prononcée le jeudi 28 novembre 2013*, Paris, Collège de France 2014, pp. 28-29).

To criticize the nationalism of others while unconsciously falling back into one's own is something that can happen even to the most illustrious historians. With the critical acumen and strong polemical bent that typify his thought, Subrahmanyam has systematically revealed how widely the insidious attractions of national sentiment continue to compromise historians' objectivity, both in the West and elsewhere. Among the many intellectual battles he has waged, perhaps the most important centers on the problem of the rapport between history and colonialism. For some Indian historians, history itself, as the exclusive product of Western culture, is useless at best and perhaps even pernicious for those who have lived without history and who should have the right to experience this absence not as a failing but rather as the expression of an uncorrupted culture, indeed as a birthright. Subrahmanyam has detected in such

attitudes the consequences of *Auto-Orientalism*, which is especially typical of some scholars working in the fields of subaltern studies and post-colonial studies. With a rare ability to move among myriad cultural traditions and historiographical environments, he has demonstrated – through countless studies written in local languages – that every culture writes history in the discursive register that prevails in its literary traditions, and that Indian cultures were able to historically articulate their past long before British colonialism exported Western historiographic practices. On this topic, see (with V. Narayana Rao and D. Shulman), *Textures of Time. Writing History in South India, 1600-1800*, New Delhi and New York, Permanent Black/Other Books, 2001.

Subrahmanyam has undertaken research on three continents: Asia, America, and Europe; he has direct experience of many cultures; and he has acquired the tools and languages needed to study them, becoming a master in the art of establishing connections. Like the historian "ogre de la légende" who "flaire la chair humaine" evoked by Marc Bloch, he sniffs out with peerless acumen all the phenomena that illustrate the notion of "connected histories," an all-encompassing concept for interpreting historical change on both a large and a small scale, and in so doing challenges traditional historical frameworks. Cf. "Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," in *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997), pp. 735-762, and the various contributions collected in the volumes *Explorations in Connected History. From the Tagus to the Ganges*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2005; *Mondi connessi. La storia oltre l'eurocentrismo (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, ed. G. Marcocci, Roma, Carocci, 2014; and *Connected History. Essays and Arguments*, London–Brooklyn, Verso Books, 2022 (first published in India as *Is 'Indian Civilization' a Myth?*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2013). "Connected History" has proved to be a concept as polemical (particularly in relation to global history) as it is creative. National history and shoddy relativism – Subrahmanyam suggests – are two intimately related things: "our purpose would be to transcend and bypass the conventional divisions imposed by the rather arbitrary way in which historians are normally trained, so as to redraw geographical boundaries in an innovative way. This does not mean we replace one set of rigid boundaries (say, of the nation-state) with another. Rather, the geographies have to be as flexible and varied as the problems. The following step, which is the really difficult one, is to multiply and read across archives and other primary sources, in keeping with the complexity

of the problem. This is why it is easy to brandish ‘connected history’ as a slogan, but rather more difficult to execute it in reality. These days there is quite a lot of ‘fake’ connected history around, in which historians pretend to read materials and archives that they really have not mastered.”

One of Subrahmanyam’s most significant contributions to contemporary historical thought concerns the global dimension of microhistory. Along these lines, there is the powerful impulse he gave to the renewal of the genre of biography. The study of the lives of individuals has become a key for investigating the development of various aspects of the modern world. His biography of Vasco da Gama, while a great success, has also provoked harsh critical reactions by inflaming the proprietary nerves of many (but not all) students of Portuguese historiography; cf. *The Career and the Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997). But the dialogue between microhistory and global history (for an overview of which cf. especially C. Ginzburg, “Microhistory and Global History,” in J.H. Bentley, S. Subrahmanyam and M. Wiesner-Hanks (eds.), *The Cambridge World History*, VI, *The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 446–473), when applied to the genre of biography, ensures the most original results when it includes not only the story of members of the elite (for example, the globetrotting careers of imperial functionaries and missionaries) but also, and perhaps above all, of the less visible but no less important lives of the marginalized and subaltern. Among his many works that have reinvigorated the connection between biography and history in this way, see at least S. Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Sinners and Saints. The Successors of Vasco da Gama*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998; S. Subrahmanyam and K. McPherson (eds.), *From Biography to History: Essays in the History of Portuguese Asia (1500–1800)*, New Delhi, TransBooks, 2005; *Three Ways to be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World*, Waltham, Brandeis University Press, 2011.

Subrahmanyam’s linguistic talent is exceptional among the historians of our time. His knowledge of Tamil, Hindi and Urdu, Persian, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch allows him wide access to original documentation and provides rigorous philological grounding for his historical studies. It is the product of supreme determination and uncompromising will, deployed in order to achieve the level of professional competence deemed necessary for the practice of authentic

“world history,” as he rightly understands the term. These efforts have allowed him to explore documents dispersed in an ocean of archives that had never previously come to the attention of world historians. But they also offer a response to one of the crucial problems of world history and global history, that being the prevalent reliance of these disciplines on the use of the English language. The gravity of the language problem has long been identified with the risk that research projects that ought to find their reason for being in the rejection of eurocentrism wind up, due to their linguistic inadequacies, contributing to the very evil they seek to avoid. The working habits of Subrahmanyam have thus imparted, to colleagues and especially to thousands of young scholars setting out in these fields of study, a valuable and inevitable lesson. They indeed invite us to reflect on standards of professional conduct in a post-Eurocentric historical epoch, and on the need to respect all the cultures with which historians aspire to engage. On the occasion of the French translation (Alma, Paris, 2018) of *Europe’s India: Words, People, Empires, 1500–1800*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2017, a volume dedicated to European visions of India in the modern period, Subrahmanyam insists on the epistemological ruptures that still endure in the academic sphere: “Une coupure s’est produite entre des historiens formés en histoire européenne, souvent assez médiatisés, qui se perçoivent comme des penseurs et des entrepreneurs de l’histoire globale, et des spécialistes, considérés comme des sherpas portant le fardeau de la traduction et de l’érudition. C’est dommage.” It is an invitation not to lose the holistic dimension of the historian’s craft, even when the spaces involved are global. And from here springs the kind of scholarly freedom that shines from every word we read in the great works of the historian whom we celebrate today.

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# WHY CONNECTED HISTORIES?

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## SOME REFLECTIONS

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*In a word, let us cease if you please to speak endlessly between one national history and another, without ever understanding each other.*

Marc Bloch (1928).<sup>1</sup>

I would like to begin by sincerely thanking the Prize Committee of the International Committee of Historical Sciences for having bestowed this singular honor on me. As you all know, this ceremony was supposed to have taken place two years ago, but it has been delayed by the unprecedented pandemic conditions in which we have been living. It is a matter of great contentment for me that we are able to meet face to face at last, even if the world has yet to return to normalcy. Where to begin? I would obviously like to take this occasion to address a certain way of doing history that is frequently associated with me, namely “connected histories.”

### **“No island is an island”<sup>2</sup>**

Towards the end of the Islamic lunar month of Muharram in the year 962 H. (December 1554), the Ottoman admiral and intellectual Seydi ‘Ali Reis found himself in Ahmedabad in Gujarat (western India), putting the final touches to his work *Kitabü’l-Muhit* (“Book of the Ocean”).<sup>3</sup> Seydi ‘Ali had not intended to be in Gujarat and only found himself there because of the vagaries of navigation, having suffered a shipwreck in a massive

storm while trying to take his fleet around the Arabian Peninsula from Gwadar to Yemen. An experienced sailor in the Mediterranean, where he had served with the celebrated Hayreddin Barbarossa, the Ottoman admiral was clearly unfamiliar and rather ill at ease in the more easterly waters where he now found himself. This is what seems to have motivated him to write his text, based on the experience of having “discussed nautical matters day and night with the pilots and mariners who were on board,” during a period of roughly eight months, spent first in Basra, then in the Persian Gulf, and eventually off the coast of western India. With remarkable ingenuity, he had also managed to lay his hands on several important geographical works in Arabic by earlier writers, whether classic medieval texts or those of a more recent vintage authored by men like Ahmad ibn Majid and Sulaiman al-Mahri.<sup>4</sup> As he had learnt to his own cost, Seydi ‘Ali stated, “it was actually extremely difficult to maneuver in the Indian seas without them [such works], since the captains, commanders, and sailors, who were not experienced in these maneuvers always needed a pilot because they themselves lacked the necessary knowledge.” Eventually constituted as a companion volume to his better-known travel text *Miratü’l-Memalik* (“Mirror of Kingdoms”), we may consider the *Muhit* to be a textual tribute of sorts from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, an admission that to know the one was not to know the other.<sup>5</sup>

To draw the obvious lesson then, every ocean needs its own histories just as it needs its own navigational treatises. Neither the Mediterranean nor the Atlantic can provide a simple model to be imitated, however much historians have been tempted to do so in the past half-century or more.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for this may be evident, but they will bear rehearsing. The Mediterranean was after all a relatively small water body (one-thirtieth the surface of the Indian Ocean), with only two very limited points of exit, into the Black Sea and the Atlantic respectively.<sup>7</sup> It could sometimes be dominated by a single political system, as had been the case with the Roman Empire; such domination remained a mere ambition even for later empires. Given its oblong shape, it was also relatively quickly traversed from its northern to its southern shores, with navigation on the east-west axis being a more cumbersome affair. As a consequence of these peculiarities, the Mediterranean was the theater for a particularly dense set of crisscross interactions, which as we know was the point of departure for Fernand Braudel’s exploration of it as an object of historical study in the early modern period.<sup>8</sup>

The Atlantic Ocean, for its part, poses problems of quite the opposite order. For long centuries, until Iberian empire-building in the late 1400s, its eastern and western shores barely maintained any form of regular contact. Even after 1500, the ocean as a whole showed little or no coherence; and as even enthusiasts for Atlantic history have admitted, there are serious issues posed by “the real disjunctions that characterized the Atlantic’s historical and geographic components.”<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, Atlantic history has usually been sliced into various segments, corresponding to the various European empires that attempted to dominate one or the other set of circuits in the ocean. Furthermore, in the three centuries from 1500 on, the relationship between the two seaboard remained a deeply asymmetrical one, resembling neither the Mediterranean nor the Indian Ocean in this respect.

Let me turn then to my main spatial object, the western Indian Ocean, or “Green Sea (*al-bahr al-akhzar*).” Since histories must begin somewhere, this one may as well commence in the kingdom of Hurmuz in the Persian Gulf, a small but complex maritime state centering on the tiny and singularly arid island of Jarun, with its striking multi-colored array of soils. Though the island was probably an ancient site of human habitation, its role as the center of a kingdom was consolidated only from around 1300, at a time when the Mongol Il-Khanid dynasty had come to rule over a good part of the mainland to the north, after having ended the five-century long career of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad in 1258.<sup>10</sup> Jarun’s immediate neighbor further up the Gulf was the far larger island of Qishm, which was certainly much better endowed in terms of natural resources, but neither as defensible nor as strategically situated in terms of the control of the waterways. By the middle decades of the fourteenth century, Jarun and Hurmuz were well positioned to take over the dominant role as entrepôt that had once been held by the port of Siraf on the Iranian mainland, and then by Qais. This is testified to by the best-known of the travelers of that time, the Moroccan ‘alim Ibn Battuta, who seems to have visited it on at least two occasions, on his way to and from India. Ibn Battuta noted that the earlier settlement called Hurmuz had been on the mainland, in the region known as Mughistan, but that a newer town had then been created on “an island whose city is called Jarun,” separated from the mainland by a channel three *farsakhs* wide. He describes it as “a fine large city, with magnificent bazaars, as it is the port of India and Sind, from which the wares of India



are exported to the two 'Iraqs, Fars and Khurasan." This city was the residence of the Sultan, who at the time of his visits was Qutb-ud-Din Tahamtan bin Turan Shah, who had taken the island in the late 1310s after a protracted contest, and then added various other islands and territories to its domains on the two shores of the Gulf. The Sultan initially made a rather poor impression on Ibn Battuta, who described him as "an old man, wearing long cloaks, both skimpy and dirty, with a turban on his head, and a kerchief for a waist girdle," but he later came to realize that he was actually "one of the most generous of princes, exceedingly humble, and of excellent character."<sup>11</sup> The Moroccan traveler also noted that the royal family was apt to periodic bursts of internecine violence, notably between Tahamtan and his brother Kaiqubad and his descendants. However, it appears that the initiative to build up Jarun and make it a real political center had in fact come from outside this family. The most significant figures in the matter were a couple of enterprising former Turkish slaves, Baha-ud-Din Ayaz and Bibi Maryam, who in the last years of the thirteenth century had managed to stave off pressure from rival groups of Mongols on the mainland, in order to carve out a coastal domain including Qalhat (in Oman), but centering on Jarun, where Ayaz himself settled and ruled for a time during the first decade of the fourteenth century.

After the political consolidation that Tahamtan and his allies then brought about, the central place of Jarun and Hurmuz was assured in the next century and a half, despite regular bouts of internal political turbulence. Though there is a paucity of contemporary sources from the second half of the fourteenth century, a fair amount of light is shed once again on Hurmuz's role in the Indian Ocean trade on account of the Chinese sources of the Ming dynasty during the first three decades of the fifteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Several of the celebrated expeditions of the admiral Zheng He put in at the port, and usually followed a fairly regular pattern of spending two months there from mid-January to mid-March, before embarking on their return voyage to China. As an authoritative analysis of these Chinese materials puts it: "All 'first-hand information' on Hormuz, as on many other distant ports and polities, was collected in the days of Zheng He – by Ma Huan, Gong Zhen and Fei Xin, who accompanied Zheng He on his expeditions. Later sources merely repeat what these three authors had to tell, without adding anything new to the stock of data then available." The account by the translator Ma Huan is particularly intriguing, since he was himself a convert to Islam.<sup>13</sup> Rather

than an ethnocentric or condescending view, he paints a highly idealized picture of Hurmuz, in which everyone in the kingdom is a devout Muslim who follows every aspect of the *shari'a* to the letter, and beyond. Not only are the people "refined and fair," but they are "stalwart and fine-looking; their clothing and hats are handsome, distinctive and elegant." Besides, he also provides an extensive list of the different commodities traded on the market, though he omits to mention perhaps the most significant of them, the horses that were brought in from the mainland in order to be exported to Indian destinations in Gujarat, the Deccan, and the Kanara and Kerala ports such as Bhatkal, Kannur, and Calicut (Kozhikode).

The picture that can be gleaned from the Ming sources becomes still clearer because of a narrative account in Persian from the early 1440s, written by 'Abdur Razzaq Samarqandi. 'Abdur Razzaq was the envoy sent by the Timurid ruler Mirza Shahrukh to Kerala, in order to assert his preeminence in the maritime world of the western Indian Ocean at that time, in competition with the Yemeni Rasulids or the Cairo-based Mamluks. Arriving in Hurmuz from Herat in the early part of 1442, in order to take a ship bound for Kerala, this is how he describes the port.

"Hurmuz, which they call Jarun, is a port in the midst of the sea, with no equal on the face of the earth. Merchants from the seven climes, Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, Azerbaijan, Arabian and Persian 'Iraq, Fars, Khorasan, Transoxiana, Turkestan, the Qipchaq steppe, the Qalmaq regions, and all the lands of the east, China, Machin, and Khanbaliq, all come to that port, and seafaring men from Machin, Java, Bengal, Ceylon, the cities of the Land below the Winds (*zirbad*), Tenasserim, Soqotra, Siam (*shahr-i nav*), and the Maldive Islands, to the realm of Malibar, Abyssinia and Zanj, the ports of Vijayanagara, Gulbarga, Gujarat, and Cambay, the coast of the Arabian peninsula to Aden, Jiddah and Yanbu', bring to that town precious and rare commodities."<sup>14</sup>

This is an extensive list in sum, running all the way from East Africa to the ports of China. 'Abdur Razzaq notes that goods and people from the world over can be found in Hurmuz, and further that the trade is taxed a very reasonable tenth, save for gold and silver, on which no duties are paid. In contrast to Ma Huan, he also underlines that "adherents of various religions, even infidels, are many in the city, but they deal



equitably with all.” According to the Timurid envoy, the town was known as the Abode of Peace (*dar al-aman*), while the people resident there were “as flattering as Persians, and as profound as Indians (*tamalluq-i ‘Iraqiyan wa ta’ammuq-i Hindiyan*).” His later experience with the Hurmuzis when he was on his mission in southern India would lead him to somewhat modify this opinion.

Thanks to the meticulous research of the French savant Jean Aubin in the 1950s and 1960s, it is possible to reconstruct the principal elements of the morphology of Hurmuz in the later fifteenth century, even in the absence of reliable cartographic evidence.<sup>15</sup> The new settlement of Hurmuz was initially built around 1300 on a spur of land at the extreme north of the island of Jarun, which pointed towards the Iranian mainland. There were two port-sites, to the east and west respectively, both considered to be of rather good quality. The fortified residence of the kings was in this same area, south of Point Murna, with nine bulwarks, and several points of entry. This structure was at an elevation and supposedly the most imposing royal palace in that part of the Gulf, at least in the view of most sixteenth-century commentators. Between the palace and the seafront to the west were several elite residences. These included the residence of the Fali *wazirs*, while another building was generally used to house the blinded princes of the royal family. In front of the palace was an important *madrasa* and infirmary complex with a minaret, which had been constructed by the ruler Turan Shah (r. 1347-77).<sup>16</sup> Some of these significant buildings were either heavily damaged or destroyed however in an earthquake in February 1483. In the center of the town itself, some 250 meters south of the royal palace was the imposing congregational mosque founded at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and then considerably enlarged at the end of the same century. The Dutch Jesuit Gaspar Berze described it, undoubtedly with some exaggeration, as “the largest and the most beautiful mosque that there is in all of Moordom.”<sup>17</sup>

It was in the eastern port and anchorage that one found the customs-house (*gumruk*), located there because the eastern side was the one preferred by ships for its commodity except on those occasions when they needed to shelter from rough winds blowing in from the Indian Ocean. On the same side, further to the south along the coast, one encountered the wharfs for ship construction as well as the main warehouses to stock goods. In the town itself were several squares (in Portuguese: *praças*), of

which the largest (that housed the major market) is referred to by Persian authors as the Maidan-i Jarun, and which was probably at the eastern end of the urban space. It is unclear if the town was really organized on a regular chessboard pattern, as some conventional drawings from a later period suggest. There was certainly an important street leading south directly from the palace, which intersected the city’s main avenue (that ran from east to west) at right angles not far from the congregational mosque. It appears likely from descriptions that most of the other streets were deliberately made rather narrow and winding, so that houses could provide shade to each other. Most of the houses appear not to have had gardens or courtyards, were between two and four floors high, and had strategically been built of a porous volcanic stone that kept out the heat. As one approached the southern edges of the town, the houses became less frequent and instead there were reed huts that were thatched with palm fronds, in which the poorer residents lived.

At a few kilometers’ distance from the town, at Kahuru on the west coast, was an area where the townsmen went out on pleasure trips, and where one of the two royal cemeteries was located. The other main royal cemetery could be found on the east coast of the island, near a shrine dedicated to the legendary prophet Khwaja Khizr, a figure of some significance in the Gulf.<sup>18</sup> Not far from Kahuru was an area used as a polo-ground by the rulers and their retinues, and this was the same zone utilized by the kingdom’s elites for occasional retreats and to take shelter away from the urban center after an earthquake like that of 1483. This liminal area, between the town and the southern hills, housed some other interesting sites, such as those where the minority Shi’i population engaged in its Muharram celebrations, or where a handful of Indian *jogis* resided in caves, and other “Hindu” groups maintained their own shrines in order to be outside the town proper. Much beyond these, closer to the south-eastern extremity of the island, was a site designated as Tolombak (or Turan Bagh), which possessed its own water-source and small garden, as well as housing a royal pavilion, and where it was claimed one could post a lookout in order to discern the approach of ships arriving from India.

The last decades of the fifteenth century were quite turbulent ones in the Hurmuz kingdom, after the extended reign of Fakhr-ud-Din Turan Shah (r. 1436-71), the ruler at the time of ‘Abdur Razzaq’s visit. The long reign of Salghur Shah (1475-1505) was

punctuated by numerous struggles, both within the Gulf itself and with mainland powers such as the Aqqyunlu. The ruler himself had had some difficulty in seizing the throne after protracted civil wars involving his brothers, notably Shah Wais, whom he eventually defeated at Julfar through a combination of military force and subterfuge. Though a variety of Omani clans played some role in his success, his main allies seem to have been a set of powerful families from the Iranian coast, who had fleets of boats equipped with efficient archers. It was therefore no surprise to see the emergence during his reign of one of these families, the powerful Fali clan, which came to occupy the position of *wazir* that had been held earlier at Hurmuz by first the Baghdadi family, and then by the Iji Sayyids. Among them, we may note the preeminent figure of Ra'is Nur-ud-Din Fali, who also came to control the lucrative customs-house at Hurmuz and its revenues. At the same time, a significant role was carved out during Salghur Shah's reign by members of the corps of royal slaves (*ghulams*), who had quite diverse origins. The complex nature of the trading links in Hurmuz had created a highly diversified slave market there, involving slaves imported from the Iranian mainland, as well as Ethiopians and Indians. Among these slaves, the most important personage at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century was the powerful eunuch, Khwaja 'Ata Sultani (d. 1513), who would play a key role in resisting the first Portuguese attempts to control Hurmuz in 1507-08.<sup>19</sup>

The case of Hurmuz, however atypical it may appear at first sight, holds important lessons for the historian of the early modern Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup> We should obviously avoid the construct of the "microcosm" here, since a small space such as the kingdom of Hurmuz can hardly stand in for the far larger oceanic space in which it was located, no more than Malta can be made to stand in for the Mediterranean. Rather, let us reflect – even if briefly – on the methodological questions that its study raises, and how these questions have been addressed by generations of historiography. The most remarkable aspect of Hurmuz is the complex layering of historical source material that is available for the site. Beginning with the Persian and Arabic narrative sources (including Ibn Battuta) in the fourteenth century, later periods bring other materials to the fore as well, such as collections of diplomatic correspondence, travel-texts, and eventually archival documents from the sixteenth century and beyond. For the late fifteenth century, one of Aubin's chief sources was an unpublished chronicle, the

*Tabaqat-i Mahmud Shahi* by 'Abdul Karim Nimdihi, which he read together with Nimdihi's *insha*' or letter-collection, that has subsequently been published, and which sheds light on dealings between Hurmuz, the Persian Gulf more generally, and western India.<sup>21</sup> Nimdihi himself, who spent a part of his career in southern Iran and the Gulf, and another part in the Deccan and Gujarat, is one of those figures whose trajectory breaks down the conventional geographical boundaries that historians have been wont to employ, and much the same can be said for his chief patron and employer Khwaja Mahmud Gawan Gilani (d. 1481).<sup>22</sup> Weaving together these intersecting but different sources can thus produce a rich tapestry, in which Hurmuz proves to be an indispensable knot.

In turn the production of context enriches our reading of any text, however trivial it may appear at first sight. We can see this logic at work in relation to a small handful of letters written in Persian and Arabic from early sixteenth-century Hurmuz, preserved today in Lisbon's Torre do Tombo. These letters were composed in September 1508 by Khwaja 'Ata Sultani, the de facto controller of the island-state and were addressed to the Portuguese commander Afonso de Albuquerque. Albuquerque had attempted in the previous year on his own initiative to seize control of Hurmuz but was obliged to abandon his attempt since many of the other captains under his command would not agree with him. By the time of his return to Hurmuz in late 1508, Khwaja 'Ata had taken the precaution of contacting his hierarchical superior, the viceroy Dom Francisco de Almeida. In one letter, he thus plays one off against the other. The letter runs as follows.

"He [In His Name]

Great Captain Afonso de Albuquerque, know that the envoy of Dom Francisco the viceroy came to us from Cochin, and he brought a letter on which there is the seal of Portugal. The letter with the seal is addressed to us, and also there is a letter for you and for the captains who are with you. Look at it. The original is for you. We know what it contains. Read the letter of your sultan. Listen and take the proper path. If you come [to us], you will see the seal of your sultan of Portugal. Let the captains come near the shore, so that we can send the envoy from Portugal to you and the seal that is on the letter addressed

to us, you will see it. The prisoners who were with you, and whom you sent to the lord of Cochin, [namely] Nakhuda 'Ali Mubariz and his companions, have been sent back to us and he treated them well. Know this. Salutations.<sup>23</sup>

The letter is written in a fair hand, but as Jean Aubin who carefully analyzed it notes, it was certainly dictated and not written by Khwaja 'Ata himself. It is characterized moreover (to quote the French scholar) by its strange informality, and “confused and dialectal style,” perhaps owing to the fact that Khwaja 'Ata was himself of Bengali origin and had not received an advanced literary education. Albuquerque is addressed by name, and also as the *nakhuda kabir*; and the term “viceroi” is not translated (say) as *na'ib* but simply rendered as *abu zurray* from the Portuguese term *vice-rei* or *visorei*. Interestingly, we have a sixteenth-century translation into Portuguese of this letter, which we may also consider in order to obtain a sense of the distinction between original and contemporary rendering. This translation quite closely approximates many – but not all – elements of our version in more or less the same sequence. The name of the chief prisoner sent back from Cochin is rendered differently as Nakhuda Qaisar. Some small details are left out, such as the fact that the Cochin ruler (*sahib al-Kuji*) had treated them well. The exchange of a couple of letters immediately following this one is also interesting. Albuquerque attempted in these to question the authenticity of the Portuguese letters he was sent from Hurmuz, claiming for example that the wax on one of the seals looked suspicious. Khwaja 'Ata responded indignantly that he would never have forged a letter from the viceroi, and that Albuquerque was merely using this as an excuse to be a “traitor to the King of Portugal” (*haram-khwar-i padshah-i Burtukal*, which the contemporary Portuguese translation baldly renders as *tu es tredor a el Rey de Portugal*). Besides, he pointed out that the letters carried the signatures of the Portuguese viceroi and the official secretary (*nawisinda*). He also suggested that the translator or “reader (*khwananda*)” whom Albuquerque employed to deal with Persian and Arabic correspondence was incompetent and had created pointless confusion.<sup>24</sup>

A careful reading of even this small body of correspondence, in its proper context, thus allows us to understand that even as Albuquerque was attempting to exploit the political differences in Hurmuz between the rulers, the Fali family and Khwaja 'Ata, the latter was no less well-informed and able in exploiting the fissures that he knew

existed between Albuquerque, the other captains, and the Portuguese viceroi based in Cochin. His complex strategy, which proved largely successful until his death in 1513, cannot be understood with reference to stereotypical ideas of “Muslim statecraft,” or the alleged gulf between “merchants and rulers” in the Indian Ocean world.<sup>25</sup> It must instead be understood as the well-considered defense of a freeport (*dar al-aman*), which guaranteed a neutral space for different groups of merchants, rather than the fortified outpost it would become after its eventual capture by the Portuguese.

### Comparative history and beyond

One way of posing a history like that of Hurmuz would be in comparative terms, whether those comparisons were made within the limits of Asian history, or extended as far afield as Venice, Genoa, and Lübeck. The classic formulation, as we know, is that of Max Weber, which cast a long shadow extending well into the 1960s and 1970s, a period when the comparative fashion in history was probably at its peak.<sup>26</sup> This was also a time when the dominant framing in social science inflected history was provided by the master concept of “modernization,” particularly in the variant set out by the economic historian Simon Kuznets. Kuznets’s work, which involved processing an enormous body of data on a large number of countries, identified what he saw as a standard trajectory of long-term economic and social change, which (it was imagined) would diffuse from the western world and then set the pattern for “less advanced” countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>27</sup> Though Kuznets was influenced by thinkers of an earlier generation, such as Joseph Schumpeter, he in reality lacked their sophisticated historical understanding. Therefore, while he may have not intended it as such, his work became a somewhat inflexible and doctrinaire framework to understand general processes of economic (and even social) change. This in turn led to critiques and modifications from other intellectuals who had emerged from the milieu of late Czarist Russia, such as Alexander Gerschenkron. Gerschenkron’s celebrated collection of essays on the question of “economic backwardness” from 1962, despite its somewhat unsystematic and dispersed character, intended to critique the more mechanistic conceptions present both in the standard Marxist analysis of the time, and other simplistic “stage theories” of change, like those put forward by W.W. Rostow.<sup>28</sup>

Although most questions addressed by these economists and historians were explicitly framed through comparisons, these could be multiple and complex comparisons or simpler paired comparisons, such as those between India and Japan, or between India and Indonesia.<sup>29</sup> The same predilection for comparative analysis remained in place when one moved back from the more recent period to studying the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One such exercise could be to compare the workings of the Dutch and English East India Companies, which had been founded in 1602 and 1600 respectively in order to trade in the Indian Ocean, one apparently a sizeable, centralized body, with access to large amounts of capital through the Amsterdam stock exchange, and the other a rather loose and rather unstable institution, lacking a centralized chain of command, and with a complex and ambivalent relationship with networks of private traders.<sup>30</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, there was notoriously a tendency to idealize the Dutch Company (or VOC) and treat it as the most efficient and most advanced of the chartered trading companies, whether in the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic. This was again very much the consequence of a Weberian influence on such comparative studies, as can be seen from the important work of the influential Danish historian Niels Steensgaard. In particular, Steensgaard contrasted the Dutch Company not with its English counterpart but with the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* and various Asian state structures, which he saw in quite radical terms, portraying the company as an “institutional innovation” when compared to a purely “redistributive enterprise” like that of the Portuguese, Safavids or Ottomans. As he announced at the outset of his work, his real purpose had been “a study of the victorious companies,” but he had concluded that “a satisfactory study would have to be made on a comparative basis, taking into account what evidence might be unearthed concerning the losers.”<sup>31</sup> His schematic representation of Portuguese Asian society, based largely on the mocking accounts of foreign travelers who had visited, was that it was “a social system in which the ambitions are archaic although the situation is dynamic.” The entire “normative system” was in his view, one oriented towards jockeying for petty advantages of social status rather than profit maximization, and furthermore in the grip of a “constitutionally determined corruption,” which it was impossible to reform. In contrast, the Dutch Company was characterized as a rational enterprise oriented towards “solving (...) problems, [having] turned them, so to speak, to their own advantage.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, if the

central concept in relation to the Portuguese is “corruption,” with the Companies, “the key words are flexibility and planning.” Steensgaard sums up the whole matter quite pithily in an early section of the book as follows: “The downfall of the caravan trade, the defeat of the Portuguese and the triumph of the Companies was an episode in the historical process during which the Middle East and the Mediterranean region relinquished the economic leadership in favour of the Atlantic regions. It was part of the clash between the Catholic Iberian powers and the Protestant Channel powers, and it was part of the confrontation between older and newer entrepreneurial forms – a step towards the development of modern economy.”<sup>33</sup>

Much more can be said on Steensgaard, notably his selective understanding of both the *Estado da Índia* and the Islamic “gunpowder empires,” with its emphasis on customs-collection and redistribution rather than trade. It is worth noting that two other major historians who had studied the Dutch Company did not quite share his view, even if they never expressed their own opinions outright. The self-taught English historian Charles Boxer had spent several decades from the 1920s onwards studying both the Portuguese and the Dutch and had written major works of syntheses in the 1960s on both “seaborne empires.” However, he had usually shied away from an explicit comparison between the two, even though he had studied the conflicts between them in both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean contexts, and even as far east as Japan.<sup>34</sup> The American historian Holden Furber, for his part, produced a bold and wide-ranging survey of European commercial activity in the Indian Ocean between 1600 and 1800, which appeared at much the same time as Steensgaard’s work.<sup>35</sup> In this book he covered many major and minor participants, including the Dutch and English, but also the French and the Danes. Furber’s profound immersion in the archives did not allow him many illusions regarding the Dutch and the English. He was perfectly aware of how deep the issue of “corruption” ran in the Companies, and how little they corresponded to an ideal of flexibility and profit-oriented dynamism. His earlier studies had amply demonstrated that beneath the surface of the English Company, serpentine networks of private interest and familial jockeying for advantage were to be found.<sup>36</sup>

It should be clear therefore that the weighty heritage of comparative history is something that scholars of my generation, largely trained in the 1980s, have had to confront and struggle with since the very outset. But the comparisons that have been

summarized in the preceding discussion have usually been large in both their temporal and institutional dimensions, and structural in their orientation. Frequently, they have been influenced by the practice of historical sociologists (whether Marxists or Weberians) rather than the reflections of historians such as Marc Bloch, notably in his celebrated essay on comparative history from 1928.<sup>37</sup> When one rereads Bloch's essay, it is striking to note not only its vagueness on some matters, but its remarkable sophistication in regard to others. Obviously, Bloch was not particularly concerned with comparisons that would lead the historian outside Europe, though he does not seem to rule this out as a principle. Equally, he was aware that comparative history had its limits and was not, as he put it, a "new panacea." He also distinguished between two types of comparisons: one set that would lead to comparisons between societies distant in space and time that neither had common origins nor had influenced one another (here, he had in mind James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*); and the other where the comparisons were between broadly contemporaneous and neighboring societies, such as France and Germany, or France and England. For such comparisons to be useful, he went on to argue, two conditions were necessary: there should be some level of similarity between the cases under study, and there should also be some dissimilarity in the two contexts. Without the first, there was no basis for comparison, and without the latter, there was no interest left in it.

Writing at a time when comparative history was still a somewhat unpopular activity, Bloch could not have foreseen certain of its less desirable effects as its use became more and more widespread, indeed a veritable industry in certain academic contexts. I list here several of the most obvious issues with how comparative history came to be practiced: (1) the idea that the simple juxtaposition of two (or more) cases is in itself somehow significant or reveals some hidden truth; (2) the use of comparison to reinforce a predetermined hierarchy between the cases under examination, a procedure usually reinforced by a sharply asymmetrical knowledge of the two cases; (3) the reification of the objects (or cases) being studied by exaggerating their uniqueness or specificity; (4) the repetitive and slothful use of the same units of comparison rather than a flexible approach to them; and (5) the use of comparison for simple list-making or the creation of typologies for their own sake, thus for example enunciating some more-or-less random claim such as that there are seven types of empires, or five types

of cities, or eleven types of religious systems.<sup>38</sup> Certain comparative historians have even taken to openly fabricating bodies of statistical data in order to lend a spurious air of scientific precision to their exercise, claiming for example to have an "index of social development" for different societies over five, or ten or fifteen thousand years.<sup>39</sup>

It was in the context of a profound dissatisfaction with the then current state of comparative history that, in the late 1990s, I proposed an alternative in terms of "connected history" in order to rethink the geographical and spatial conceptions that underpinned the units of analysis used by historians.<sup>40</sup> The original essay was presented initially as a critique of a project by the American historian of Southeast Asia, Victor Lieberman, who had sketched out a comparative macro-history to be written in order to show the "parallels" between developments in distant parts of Eurasia, especially with regard to state formation. Embracing a thousand years of history, beginning in about 800 CE, and drawing for the most part on secondary literature, Lieberman attempted to make a typology of state forms, listing and dividing in the familiar exercise to produce an "intra-Eurasian classification."<sup>41</sup> Already in its schematic outlines, it became evident that the exercise was one in the reification of boundaries, and in reproducing certain entrenched stereotypes (such as a blunt-edged contrast between imperial unification in India and China) rather than one that led to any surprising or innovative conclusions. More than one specialist of the regions in question is likely to have winced when reading Lieberman's claims like this one: "in other critical aspects, both synchronic and diachronic, I have found precious little difference between, say, France, Burma, Japan, and Vietnam."<sup>42</sup> This was of course a very different approach than the one Carlo Ginzburg identifies with Marc Bloch: "Bloch evokes the persistent prejudice which identifies comparative history with the search for analogies, including the most superficial ones. However, the central point of comparative history, Bloch insists on the contrary, is to emphasize the specificity of the *differences* between the phenomena that are being compared."<sup>43</sup> Clearly then, there are better and worse ways of practicing comparative history.

For their part, the central propositions where "connected history" was concerned, laid the emphasis on rather different questions. The first of these was the problematic effect of nationalism and national boundaries on how historical problems themselves were formulated by imposing rigid teleologies. While these boundaries were clearly

appropriate in many cases, especially for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they had little utility when one moved back in time into the early modern and medieval periods. Not only did they obscure the importance of the study of large spatial units that cut across such boundaries, such as empires, they also downplayed the significance of smaller regions that were often historically crucial, and might be found traversing current national boundaries. However, historians were often ill-equipped to study such historical phenomena, precisely because they refused to combine the diverse archives and texts that were necessary to do so, failed to come to terms with the multiple historiographies that had to be mastered, and instead fell back on the lazy habits of their conventional training.<sup>44</sup> It thus appeared to me that a crucial question for the historian was to find the means and the skills to break down conventional spatial boundaries, when those boundaries were no longer useful but had become impediments to the study of the real historical problems that one encountered.

A second problem, once the conventional boundaries had been called into question, was the reconstitution of fresh spatial parameters appropriate to the new problems that were to be studied. Here, the central idea in “connected history” was spatial flexibility, because what might be appropriate in order to study a merchant network like the New Julfan Armenians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, might be quite inappropriate if the object of study was the cultural world of the great fifteenth-century poet and intellectual ‘Abdur Rahman Jami (1414-92).<sup>45</sup> The writings of an older generation of historians were a considerable inspiration in order to think through this issue, whether one looks back to Jean Aubin, or the American sinologist Joseph Fletcher. Both had reflected considerably on the complex and overlapping jurisdictions of political and cultural formations of the early modern period.<sup>46</sup> Neither had embraced a version of “global history” based simply on deploying and synthesizing secondary material, as had become common in the Anglo-American historiography in the wake of William McNeill, in a form that still dominates in the production of popular history in the United States and Britain.<sup>47</sup> Rather, both Aubin and Fletcher showed a restless ambition with regard to spatial units, moving from the study of cities, to the analysis of empires, to other liminal spaces. In the case of Aubin, he followed some fascinating individual trajectories of the later medieval and early modern periods, namely of minor or neglected intellectuals who moved from service in one po-

litical formation, to another, and then to a third, or fourth.<sup>48</sup> This had little or nothing to do with the “liberal cult” of mobility, as some Marxisant sociologists have recently claimed, but rather with a historically rooted understanding of the nature of the activities of chroniclers, poets, and courtiers in the Islamic world.<sup>49</sup>

The initial set of examples used in my 1997 essay were diverse and included political legends that circulated across wide spaces in Eurasia with divergent valences (such as the legend of Alexander), but also the use and reuse of millenarian schemes and materials between the late fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in a large swathe of territory, in which different politico-cultural regimes were in close communication. In the time since its initial publication, there have been several reactions to it, some drawing upon it as an intellectual resource, others based on fundamental misunderstandings, and still others hostile for a variety of reasons. The fact that it was meant to be a set of skeptical proposals in relation to a dominant paradigm – namely, a comparative history rooted in nationalism with relatively rigid units of comparison – has often been forgotten in the process. Many scholars who were studying rather banal commercial, political, or other spatial connections began to claim they were consequently and automatically practicing some form of connected history. Among the misunderstandings, perhaps the most perilous is the view that “connected history” can be transformed into a sort of *tiers-mondiste* discourse of symmetrical history (*histoire à parts égales*), in which the West and the Rest would somehow be given equal voice.<sup>50</sup> It is with some dismay that I have noted that a part of the French reading public has even become ever more convinced that European scholars can now become ventriloquists and blithely speak in the voice of the oppressed Asiatic or African “other” of the European colonizer. This is an unsustainable and abusive claim which must be firmly rejected.<sup>51</sup>

A different, and certainly more fecund, line of development was to try and combine connected history and early modern imperial history on a broad scale with no claims to symmetry of treatment. The earliest explicit attempt in that direction was by the French scholar of colonial Mexico, Serge Gruzinski, in an essay published in a special number of the well-known French journal *Annales HSS* in 2001.<sup>52</sup> Gruzinski, who is coincidentally a former laureate of this prize (in 2015) begins his essay by noting: “The chronological and geographical frameworks of historical research at times become heavy. Their rigidity often masks ethnocentric reflexes concealed behind his-



torigraphical traditions.” After some skeptical remarks directed at the contributions of scholars in Anglophone “world history” and “postcolonial studies,” he goes on to note that it was necessary to confront the issue in early modern history of “mixed landscapes, frequently disconcerting and always unpredictable.”

“The exhumation of these historical ‘connections’ has led our path to cross that of Sanjay Subrahmanyam, when he prefers research in and development of ‘connected histories’ to a comparative history that is imprecise, redundant, and full of a priori assumptions. This implies that such histories should be multiple – the fact of being plural and small-scale does not make them unimportant – and that they should be interlinked and can communicate. The presence of a baroque altarpiece in the interior of Hopi Indian chapel raises problems of interpretation which go far beyond the study of a community, a region, or a type of object. When confronted with realities that necessarily have to be approached on multiple scales, the historian should become a sort of electrician capable of reviving continental or intercontinental connections that national historiographies have long worked to disconnect or avoid by rendering their frontiers impermeable. Those that separate Portugal and Spain are an example of such blockages.”<sup>53</sup>

Gruzinski’s point of departure was therefore the sort of “mestizo objects” that had long fascinated him, and his metaphor (not mine) was that of an electrician reconnecting what had been disconnected. My own conception took as its point of departure social, cultural or political phenomena that were not necessarily concrete objects such as paintings, ivories or altarpieces. The conversation with Gruzinski was pursued in a creative way over a seminar (called “Amérique-Asie” in shorthand) that we jointly directed over several years in the EHESS in Paris in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in which he initially developed his ideas on the Catholic Monarchy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through a “connected histories” approach. However, by the time he transformed his essay cited above into a book-length project some years later, Gruzinski had embraced the overarching framework of globalization or “mondialisation”, a concept regarding which I was not (and still am not) enthusiastic.<sup>54</sup> I myself have returned to the question of combining imperial and connected histories since that time, in a variety of venues and publications.

For the sake of completeness, it may be necessary to mention two other attempts

to critique “connected history” as a proposal, albeit from very different angles. One of these comes from a fairly well-known historian of nineteenth-century Britain and the British Empire.<sup>55</sup> It begins by making a series of broad claims, that simply do not bear serious investigation, such as that comparative history is rarely practiced (and must hence be protected as a sort of infant industry); that it has no real relationship with or investment in national boundaries; and that any problems we might identify in the comparative approach are in fact general problems that can be found in all history writing. Having thus somewhat distorted the critiques of comparative history, the author can then proceed to claim that all alternatives are redundant because comparative history already does what they claim to do. After a highly selective summary of one of my essays on the connected history of millenarian movements in the Eurasian space, this essay declares for instance: “Subrahmanyam fails to demonstrate why a comparative rather than a connected approach would not reveal the synchronicity he finds between these various forms of millenarianism.”<sup>56</sup> The point however is that my essay is not simply about identifying synchronicity, which is merely a point of departure rather than (as the critic mistakenly believes) the point of arrival; the essay is actually but about the complex relationship and cross-fertilization between a whole series of political movements and ideologies operating with highly flexible geographies.<sup>57</sup> For our critic, the objects of study have already been fixed and have a rigid predetermined geography to them, such as that given for example by a highly conventional British and British empire history. In this view, one can apparently either work with the universal or the particular, and the particular leads ineluctably to the national.<sup>58</sup>

A critique from a very different angle has come from a handful of authors using the vocabulary of postcolonial studies. In the 1990s, the same intellectual conjuncture that produced the exchanges concerning comparative and connected histories referred to above also produced a different form of critique of Eurocentrism, at the level of meta-history. The best-known text in that context was the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work *Provincializing Europe*, which was intended to critique a discursive formation in which it was “impossible to *think* of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe.”<sup>59</sup> Chakrabarty explored this critique in relation to various intellectual strands, including Marxism, to which



he and others of his school (the so-called “Subaltern Studies collective”) were broadly attached. Although he had begun his career as a social and economic historian with a comparative bent of mind (comparing the formation of the Indian and English industrial working-class), in this later book Chakrabarty had thus moved to a sort of meta-history or intellectual history, with limited implications for general historical practice. Like many other Subaltern Studies historians, he continued even after this critique to remain wedded to conventional geographies of nation-state (India) and region (in his case, Bengal), and a chronological focus that was largely on the period after 1800. There was thus little or no intersection at this point between postcolonial studies and connected history.<sup>60</sup>

A few other postcolonial scholars, on the other hand, have chosen as their research period the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and as their geographical focus the Indian Ocean largely studied through Iberian sources. In the somewhat sanctimonious and moralizing mode that characterizes this strand, a few have attempted to develop a critique of “connected history”, which they portray as having become dominant and even “ubiquitous” over time. It is claimed that “twenty years of ‘connected history’ writing have brought little clarity over whether ‘connectedness’ refers to connections as the object of study, a quality inherent to the objects studied, or the way any object might be studied – or indeed all three, or any given combination.”<sup>61</sup> For my part let me make it clear that the purpose of “connected histories” has never been the study of connections as such (a very traditional subject, best left to historians of technologies like the post and telegraph) or the “inherent” quality of objects (which would be an unfortunate strategy of reification). Confusing the distinct terms “circulation” and “connection” also brings little or no light to the issue. Rather, the crucial question has been one of whether our current geographies are adequate for our research questions or ill-fitted to deal with them.

To my mind, these criticisms can hardly claim to represent an advance on writings from the 1950s, and in fact takes matters several steps back from Aubin’s complex studies of the Portuguese in the Persian Gulf with which I began.<sup>62</sup> A reflective historian of Sri Lanka who wishes to go beyond the conventional geographical conception (not to say cliché) of an island in isolation, into which European invaders erupted and perpetrated gratuitous violence, will remark the need to constantly rethink Sri Lanka’s

history in relation to other histories, those of Kerala and the Tamil and Telugu countries for example, or even the Malay and mainland Southeast Asian world.<sup>63</sup> They may wish to address why the great Mappila entrepreneurs from Kerala of the 1530s such as Palassi Marikkar invested so much time, effort and even their lifeblood in trying to maintain their influence in the vestiges of the Kotte kingdom in western Sri Lanka, or analyze why the key intermediaries between Sri Lankan rulers and the Portuguese in the period were often Tamil-speaking Srivaishnavas. In a related vein, the historian would do well to question the easy separation between the two shores of the Gulf of Mannar in this period, in view of the fact that so many historical actors made their living by constantly traversing it.<sup>64</sup> Rather than writing blandly of those “lucky enough to hear other voices in the archive than European ones,” it is crucial to recognize that such “luck” is often made by acquiring research skills, rather than just handed to those who remain in the familiar archives within arm’s reach and treading the usual formulaic paths. Only then do we have sole possibility of questioning, or disturbing, the proponents of a conservative and nationalist Sri Lankan historiography that still remains very much in place today.<sup>65</sup>

To conclude, the central aim of deploying “connected histories” as a form of *Oppositionswissenschaft* has never been to substitute one totalizing history for another, or King Log by King Stork. Nor is it to provide a schematic view of history, by resorting to a high level of abstraction or generalization. Rather, its strategy may be conceptualized as proposing a recourse to a set of diverse and innovative archival and textual incisions in order to grasp various aspects of the object under study, which may be a maritime world like that of the Indian Ocean, or any one of a varied set of other objects that may be conceived quite differently. I am of course aware that in this set of reflections I may have taken some of you quite far from your own preoccupations, whether in terms of space, time or theme. For that I must ask your indulgence, though I am well aware that I am speaking in the country of historians such as Marian Małowist and Jan Kieniewicz, who have never been afraid to explore distant and complex geographical horizons. Let me conclude then by echoing Bloch who admonished us nearly a century ago: “Let us cease if you please to speak endlessly between one national history and another, without ever understanding each other.”

## NOTES

- 1 Marc Bloch, "A contribution towards a comparative history of European societies," in Bloch, *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe: Selected papers*, trans. J.E. Anderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 44-81.
- 2 I borrow the section title from Carlo Ginzburg, *No island is an island: Four glances at English literature in a world perspective*, trans. John Tedeschi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
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- 4 See Gerald R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation before the Coming of the Portuguese: Being a Translation of "Kitab al-Fawa'id fi usul al-bahr wa'l- qawa'id" of Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi together with an Introduction on the History of Arab Navigation, Notes on the Navigational Techniques and on the Topography of the Indian Ocean, and a Glossary of Navigational Terms* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1972).
- 5 Seyyidi 'Ali Re'is, *Le miroir des pays : Une anabase ottomane à travers l'Inde et l'Asie centrale*, trans. Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999).
- 6 See, for example, the reflections in Denys Lombard, "Une autre 'Méditerranée' dans le Sud-Est asiatique," *Hérodote*, No. 88, 1998, pp. 184-193, as well as in Heather Sutherland, "Southeast Asian History and the Mediterranean Analogy," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2003, pp. 1-20.
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- 8 See Fernand Braudel, *Autour de la Méditerranée*, eds. Paule Braudel and Roselyne de Ayala (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1996).
- 9 Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 3, 2006, pp. 741-757.
- 10 Jean Aubin, *Études sur l'Iran médiéval: Géographie historique et société*, ed. Denise Aigle (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2018), pp. 63-90.
- 11 Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, AD 1325-1354*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1962), pp. 400-402.
- 12 Ralph Kauz and Roderich Ptak, "Hormuz in Yuan and Ming sources," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, Vol. 88, 2001, pp. 27-75.
- 13 Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan: 'The overall survey of the ocean's shores' (1433)*, ed. and trans. Feng Chengjun and J.V.G. Mills (Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1970).
- 14 See the discussion in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 59-60; and for the text, 'Abdur Razzaq ibn Ishaq Samarqandi, *Matla' us-Sa'dain wa Majma' ul-Bahrain*, Vol. 2, ed. Muhammad Shafi', 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Lahore: Gilani, 1946-49), pp. 768-769.
- 15 Jean Aubin, "Le royaume d'Ormuz au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle," in Aubin, *Le Latin et l'Astrolabe*, 3 Vols. (Paris : Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 1996-2006), Vol. 2, pp. 287-376.
- 16 João de Barros, *Da Ásia, Década Segunda*, Part 2 (Lisbon: Régia Officina Typográfica, 1777), p. 422: "humas grandes casas ... que serviam de hospital, a que elles chamam madraçal, as quaes eram junto da fortaleza".
- 17 "Ha mais grande e formosa mesquita que ay em toda moramma": Gaspar Berze S.J. to the Society of Jesus, Hurmuz, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1549, in Josef Wicki, ed., *Documenta Indica, Vol. 1 (1540-49)* (Rome: Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu, 1948), p. 690.
- 18 Ahmad Iqtidari, ed., *Asar-i shahrha-yi bastani: Sawahil wa jazayir-i Khalij-i Fars wa Darya-yi 'Uman*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Tehran: Anjuman-i Asar wa Mufakhir-i Farhangi, 1375/1996), pp. 682-739.
- 19 Aubin, "Cojeatar et Albuquerque," in Aubin, *Le Latin et l'Astrolabe*, Vol. 2, pp. 149-196.
- 20 It is also the more astonishing to find it almost entirely ignored in such survey essays as Michael Pearson, "Islamic trade, shipping, port-states and merchant communities in the Indian Ocean, seventh to sixteenth centuries," in David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid, eds., *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. 3: The Eastern Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 315-365.
- 21 'Abdul Karim Nimdihi, *Kanz al-ma'ani: Munsha'at-i Nimdihi*, eds. Muhammad Riza Nasiri and Muhammad Baqir Wusuqi (Tehran: Farhangistan-i Zaban wa Adab-i Farsi, 1394 Sh./2015-16). For a discussion of this source, see Meia Walravens, "Arabic as a Language of the South Asian Chancery: Bahmani Communications to the Mamluk Sultanate," *Arabica*, No. 67, 2020, pp. 409-435. For Nimdihi's chronicle, see Cambridge University Library, Eton Pote 271 (on permanent loan from Eton College Library), *Tabaqat-i Mahmud Shahi*, fls. 381v-469r (ninth *tabaqa*).
- 22 Jean Aubin, "Indo-islamica I : La vie et l'œuvre de Nimdihi," *Revue des Etudes islamiques*, No. 34, 1966, pp. 61-81.
- 23 Aubin, "Les documents arabes, persans et turcs de la Torre do Tombo," in Aubin, *Le Latin et l'Astrolabe*, Vol. 2, pp. 424-425.
- 24 Aubin, "Les documents arabes, persans et turcs de la Torre do Tombo," pp. 426-427.
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- 26 Max Weber, *The City*, trans. and ed. Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (New York: The Free Press, 1958). For a trenchant critique, which includes the views of orientalist like Jean Sauvaget, see André Raymond, "Islamic City, Arab City: Orientalist Myths and Recent Views," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1994, pp. 3-18.
- 27 Simon Kuznets, *Modern economic growth: Rate, structure, and spread* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).
- 28 Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic backwardness in historical perspective: A book of essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1962).
- 29 For an early overview of such attempts, see B.R. Tomlinson, "Writing History Sideways: Lessons for Indian Economic Historians from Meiji Japan," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1985, pp. 669-698. See the special issue entitled "India and Indonesia: General Perspectives," in *Itinerario*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1989. My own contributions to this comparative exercise may be found in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Aspects of State Formation in South India and Southeast Asia, 1500-1650," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1986, pp. 357-377; and in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "State Formation and Transformation in Early Modern India and Southeast Asia," *Itinerario*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1988, pp. 91-109.
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- 31 Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 7.

- 32 Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, p. 151.
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- 34 C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch seaborne empire, 1600-1800* (New York: Knopf, 1965); C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese seaborne empire, 1415-1825* (London: Hutchinson, 1969).
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- 36 Holden Furber, *John Company at work: A study of European expansion in India in the late eighteenth century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948).
- 37 Marc Bloch, "A contribution towards a comparative history of European societies".
- 38 This unhealthy obsession with list-making can be found in Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). For a penetrating critique of this work, see Giuseppe Marcocci, "La grande metamorfosi del lungo Ottocento: Una via weberiana alla storia del mondo?," *Archivio Storico Italiano*, Vol. 175, No. 2, 2017, pp. 383-394.
- 39 Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules – for Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (London: Profile Books, 2010).
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- 41 The end product appeared in two massive volumes: Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, 2 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003-2009).
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- 43 Carlo Ginzburg, *Cinco reflexiones sobre Marc Bloch*, trans. Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas (Bogotá: Desde Abajo, 2016), p. 75.
- 44 For a sorry attempt to defend such intellectual slothfulness, see Indrani Chatterjee, "Connected Histories and the Dream of Decolonial History," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No.1, 2018, pp. 69-86; which may be compared to the brilliant work of Thibaut d'Hubert, *In the shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali poetics in Arakan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 45 Thibaut d'Hubert and Alexandre Papis, eds., *Jāmi in regional contexts: The reception of 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmi's works in the Islamic world, ca. 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century* (Boston: Brill, 2018); Sebouh D. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The global trade networks of Armenian merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
- 46 Joseph Fletcher, "Ch'ing Inner Asia c. 1800," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 35-106; Jean Aubin, *Emirs mongols et vizirs persans dans les remous de l'acculturation* (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 1995).
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- 48 Jean Aubin, "Un chroniqueur méconnu, Šabānkāra'i," in Aubin, *Etudes sur l'Iran médiéval*, pp. 143-154 ; and Aubin, "Indo-islamica I: La vie et l'œuvre de Nimdihi." In somewhat the same spirit, see Christopher Markiewicz, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam: Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
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- 50 Romain Bertrand, *L'histoire à parts égales : Récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Paris : Seuil, 2011). Few published critiques have noted the hundreds of inaccuracies and errors in the references to Dutch, Portuguese, and Malay sources that litter the pages of this book.
- 51 In contrast to Bertrand, see, for example, the important writings of Claude Guillot, "Libre entreprise contre économie dirigée: Guerres civiles à Banten, 1580-1609," *Archipel*, No. 43, 1992, pp. 57-72; Claude Guillot, Lukman Nurhakim and Sonny Wibisono, *Banten avant l'Islam: Etude archéologique de Banten Girang (Java, Indonésie) 932(?) -1526* (Paris: EFEO, 2005); Special number, "Banten: Histoire d'une région," *Archipel*, No. 50, 1995.
- 52 Serge Gruzinski, "Les mondes mêlés de la monarchie catholique et autres « connected histories »," *Annales HSS*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2001, pp. 85-117.
- 53 Gruzinski, "Les mondes mêlés de la monarchie catholique," p. 87.
- 54 Serge Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties du monde: Histoire d'une mondialisation* (Paris : La Martinière, 2004). I broadly concur with the critique of "globalization" as a concept in Frederick Cooper, "What is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective," *African Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 399, 2001, pp. 189-213.
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- 56 Levine, "Is Comparative History Possible?," p. 336.
- 57 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Turning the Stones Over: Sixteenth-Century Millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2003, pp. 131-163.
- 58 We may thus consider Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), which Levine holds up in her essay as a model of comparative history. It is divided into a first "universal" section, and a second long section where almost all chapters are divided by national boundaries, or conventional regional classifications.
- 59 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 4 (emphasis in original).
- 60 However, a slightly different perspective may emerge from reading Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a global practice of power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), which addresses some issues deriving from connected history.
- 61 Zoltán Biedermann, "(Dis)connected History and the Multiple Narratives of Global Early Modernity," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 119, No. 1, 2021, pp. 13-32.
- 62 Zoltán Biedermann, *(Dis)connected Empires: Imperial Portugal, Sri Lankan Diplomacy, and the Making of a Habsburg Conquest in Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 63 See Anne Blackburn, "Buddhist Connections in the Indian Ocean: Changes in Monastic Mobility, 1000-1500," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 58, No. 3, 2015, pp. 237-266.
- 64 Jorge Manuel Flores, *Os Portugueses e o Mar de Ceilão: Trato, diplomacia e guerra (1498-1543)* (Lisbon: Edições Cosmos, 1998).
- 65 The citations are from Biedermann, "(Dis)connected History," p. 14.

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