

“1919 was ‘year zero’ for internationalism”

Interview with *Jeremy Adelman* • Professor of History, Princeton University

In October 2018, the workshop “Humanitarian Photojournalism: A History of the Present” was organised at Princeton University. The main goal of this event was to think about “the connections between the rising importance of photojournalism and the rise of global humanitarianism”. One of the workshop’s organisers, the Global Historian Jeremy Adelman, granted us an interview.

Humanitarian Alternatives – “Global history” developed in the 1990s, decades after “world history”. The two expressions are the same in French and would both be translated as *histoire mondiale*. Can you explain the nuances?

Jeremy Adelman – Global history as a term and even as an identity emerged in the 1990s, and especially after 2000 and has always had an agenda: to write the narrative of globalisation. But what is globalisation? Is there only one form of globalisation? Some people say that there were earlier models of globalisation and global integration. One of the driving motivations was to transcend what is called “methodological nationalism”, which is the assumption that the natural organising unit for how we imagine our togetherness is the nation. The other was to decentre Europe from the narrative of what connects humans across distance. World history, which was a predecessor, had neither of those ambitions. For world historians, even the UNESCO narrative of the “History of Mankind” and Fernand Braudel’s own aspirations to write a *Histoire du monde* which was a history of all nations, Europe was still the model that everybody’s unit had to copy, it wasn’t really getting around nationalism.

H. A. – In 2019 we celebrate the milestones of global history with the birth, one hundred years ago, of the Society of Nations, ancestor to the UN, of the League of the Red Cross [the modern-day International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies] and the Save the Children Fund. These are icons of multilateralism, cosmopolitanism and transnational solidarity networks that are constantly developing. While cosmopolitanism has produced some of the most emblematic of these organisations, why did global history arrive so late? Is it because world history incorporated these organisations as a sign of the rising “universalism” created by the West in the aftermath of the “Enlightenment”?

J. A. – 1919 was “year zero” for internationalism. That word really takes off with all these organisations, the League of Nations, the Nansen Passport and new actors on the international stage that were self-consciously internationalist and transcended nations. Civil society began to imagine itself as a post-national construction. The paradox was that internationalism stemmed from the First World War, which was an outburst of a fever of nationalism and always had been, in the trans-war situation from 1914 to 1945. Global historians lagged behind because while these were internationalist organisations, extremely important for our own historical imaginations, they were not the same as the study of interdependence. Those humanitarian and internationalist organisations that emerged in 1919 did not associate themselves as organisations dedicated to thinking about our ethical commitments to strangers based on our dependence upon strangers, but only on the way strangers depend on us. That is what globalisation changed;

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we started to recognise more inter-dependence.

H. A. – *How do you position humanitarianism in global history?*

J. A. – Global history was motivated much more by economic processes and perhaps even strategic and political concerns. Humanitarianism came along later. Part of what we do is to try and think, what does an agenda for global history look like when we start to think about sympathy or emotional connections across distance and not just conjunctions of interests. What is the relationship between interests and sympathy? This is a classical problem that was explored by Montesquieu or Adam Smith. We are going back to rethinking some of the intellectual foundations of the social sciences when we do this. As we begin to think about humanitarianism, it is important to think beyond a binary approach: a narrowed vision of self-interest on the one hand and a detached vision of sympathy or empathy on the other – as if our interests and our sympathies were not somehow connected to each other. In practice, we are certainly into mixed models between economic actors motivated only by economic interests and humanitarian NGOs motivated only by sympathy. There is a long tradition of *noblesse oblige* and so they were never separated out. I think that it was only in the domain of the social sciences that they tended to separate them. Economic historians studied one set of actors and one set of processes and philosophers looked at other kinds. When we think about issues of climate change or the migrant crisis, we have to get over our 19th century disciplinary boundaries. Global history is one way of doing that.

H. A. – *After the Indonesian disaster in September 2018, the national government refused to open its borders to rescuers and NGOs from outside. Is this a way for global south countries to say what they decide and affirm their own part in the humanitarianism history, a history that has left out global south actors?*

J. A. – From 1919, there have always been tensions around sovereignty. The paradox of globalisation is that globalisation and interdependency create risks, pressures and dislocations, including disasters that compel actors to turn to the nation State that has been weakened by globalisation. So, we are always trying to transcend national sovereignty. Until we get a “global State,” people will have to turn to national sovereignty to cope with the upheavals of global integration –and disintegration. Part of the backlash we are currently experiencing against globalism with Brexit, Trump and Putin or the Indonesians and so on, is to restore the idea of a world of nations, of sovereign nations. We have a new game, which I think is a very dangerous one.

H. A. – *You underline that the institutionalisation of global history and global knowledge has removed the spotlight from the “less sexy scale of civic engagement”. Has humanitarianism also overshadowed the smaller but no less important work of local initiatives?*

J. A. – I think that traditionally, there has been a problem that cosmopolitanism and the international civil society have, in the language of charity, mobilised to give relief and support to the suffering stranger. They have often had a very difficult time understanding that nearby we had this phenomenon called the production of the “near stranger”. The migrant crisis broke down the distance between far-flung disasters and strangerhood at home and that is part of what is driving the nationalist reaction to externalise the stranger, to reconstitute the nation by keeping the stranger out. Humanitarian organisations, in producing the idea of suffering that happens in “tropicalised” places, somewhere else and an iconography of the modernist white,

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prosperous, middle class, mirrored an idea of the national self. The complication of recognising the near stranger means that those “dark skins” (in the sense that Frantz Fanon meant it) are right here too, with us, as part of the nation that we now do not want to deal with.

H. A. – *Can you give us a more explicit definition of the “resterners” and the strangers at home, two notions that are important for you? Will the humanitarian system be able to reconcile the two?*

J. A. – Historically speaking the major humanitarian organisations were created at a time during which the idea of the “west” and the “rest” was constructed. They played a role in reproducing that divide. Nowadays, that divide is being erased because the “resterners” are right here and the westerners are “out there” beyond the national borders. Global flows have messed up the lines that separate west and rest. So, it will be a challenge to rethink the word “humanitarian”. It has implied that social agency is located in one place and passivity is located in another place, far away, where needy people live, that humanitarianism is about transmitting and acting in that place where there is no action, where people wait for their saviours. This has to change. The word “humanitarian” carries so much baggage associated with this old division and hierarchy.

H. A. – *Why is a conversation about photojournalism and humanitarianism so important for you as a global historian? With the development of actors producing images, is there still a connection between photojournalism and humanitarians?*

J. A. – It is important because we have a crisis of both. A crisis of humanitarianism, not necessarily as in decline but as in an opportunity to rethink the foundational coordinates of what we think we are doing in the world. That crisis also intervenes because of the scale of the challenges and because of the new kind of actors that need to be brought into the story. A crisis of photojournalism, in a kind of post-truth age in which the war over how we understand our relationship to strangers is also a war of images. Photojournalists are playing an important role in that contest now. We could talk about what happened in Syria. It became very clear that competing circulations of images were part of the debate over the legitimacy of the actors playing a role in the Syrian crisis. But when we are looking at images we are also actively involved in the circulation of these competitive signs. It is naïve to think that just because everybody can put images of suffering or exaltation on to an internet platform that there is not a selection process favouring the circulation of some images over others. There is a cast of actors whose preselected activity to produce images has more status than others. It is not a level playing field. Even though social networks make people feel like the old hierarchies are gone, I do not believe that. The machinery of commodification of images is still actively at work, what has changed is the definition of the photojournalist and even their self-identity. What is a photojournalist? Not that the photojournalist is dead, but the photojournalist has been at the service of the *New York Times*, the CIA, the aid agency or Vladimir Putin’s secret police, it is just that they are now being financed by different kinds of organisations. Our current conjuncture allows us to ask that question more explicitly. It does not make the photojournalist irrelevant, if anything it makes them more relevant as an actor to be interrogated.

I think we can categorise what we might call “Humanitarian photojournalism”. This emerged from war photography. There were people who described themselves as war photographers from the 19th century onwards. And there are now some photojournalists – and they describe themselves as such – who are crusaders for humanitarianism. James Natchwey is one. Others are also celebrated as portraying something called “humanity”, with all its inequalities and injustices.

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H. A. – *What does the switch between war photographer and humanitarian photographer mean? Has the definition of photojournalist changed?*

J. A. – We need to be thinking about the definition of conflict. In 1919, humanitarian crises were seen as a by-product of war. What we are now seeing is that humanitarian crises can also produce wars. The causality is inferred in the relationship between a war and social disaster. It is now getting all mixed up, especially in the era of climate change. What would be the difference between eco-critical photojournalism and humanitarian photojournalism? There is a rupture in the categories. Even the category of the humanitarian photojournalist's identity is being contested, resisted and changed.

With regard to photojournalists, if you are producing a photograph for the *New York Times*, will the paper think as a machine of objectivity? We now know that it will not and that the editors are very aware of certain kinds of meanings that do not depict some objective portrait of reality. Were they ever really outside the political economy of the news? Are philanthropic organisations ever really outside the political economy of charity? It is often said that wars sell newspapers and newspapers sell wars. But wars create photojournalistic careers too. Robert Capa became famous thanks to the Spanish civil war. He chose the Spanish civil war while Abyssinia was forgotten. Interestingly enough, it was the South African journalist, George Steer, who reported in the *Times* about Abyssinia, and then moved to Spain as soon as the Spanish civil war started. He was the first one in Guernica. So, when Picasso was looking at photographs of Guernica in the French newspapers in late April 1937, after the republican government commissioned him to paint for the Paris World Exposition, Picasso did not know about Abyssinia. But he learned about Guernica, read Steer's reports and saw the first agonising photos of the bombing. The final painting of Guernica had the shapes of agony and ruin that Picasso saw in those photos; it was rendered in black and white, like the photos. Maybe these are the thoughts of a faded, bygone Marxism, but I still tend to think that no institutions live outside the wider global economy of which they are a part.

Journalists are condemned to have a problem that they constantly need to resolve: what is truth, what is objectivity? Also, how much control do they have over the image? For example, the "napalm girl", Nick Ut's famous photograph from Vietnam: he only saw the photograph weeks later. Or the famous photograph of the three-year-old boy, Alan Kurdi on the Turkish beach. It was taken by a young Turkish photojournalist: from all the pictures she sent to the Turkish press agency, the editors chose the one with the boy face down. Why? The photographer had no power over that.

H. A. – *We can question the role of emotion, such as when you quote Susan Sontag: "images turn distant suffering into a show, grist for a society of spectacles, turning distress into entertainment". Is there no hope left?*

J. A. – That is a reaction to my own utopianism. The line before that quote is "I was once a dreamer". But Sontag did have an insight; there is a side beside the political economy, which is a cognitive one. It is about the limits of our capacity to process empathy and sympathy, as there is sympathy fatigue. We have to think about what the limits are to empathy, to cosmopolitanism, especially if we are going to give good answers to the nativists with whom we live. When we think back on global history, when we think about interdependency and togetherness, we have to be much more attentive to people's ambivalent feelings about meeting people they do not know. With the construction of distance, we no longer have ritual encounters with strangers.

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There were once arenas like the market place or the temple, that were traditional places in “village life” where strangers would meet. We cannot find them anymore. That is why the image has interceded in us so we have to think about what connects us together. This is where the producers, circulators and selectors of images of other places play a role in attaching us and detaching us. Susan Sontag’s point was to say, “do not assume that the photograph always connects us”.

H. A. – *Gisèle Freund said that what is magic about photography is that it abolishes distance. I think that was also the ideology or utopia for humanitarians, that suffering in the distance or at borders would be abolished. With the nationalism and border builders that we have today: did we fail?*

J. A. – I do not think we failed. Take again the Alan Kurdi photograph in early September 2015. That family had applied for asylum in Canada and had been turned away. The government at the time, before Trudeau, denied any involvement but it emerged in the middle of the election campaign that it had. As a result, the photograph played a role in overturning that conservative government. The same photograph shocked and mobilised people, affecting German migration policy, which then affected European policy. Even here in the US, there was this outpouring, an unimaginable groundswell. This was just three and a half years ago, and yet by the middle of November 2015, the dynamic changed with the attacks in Paris. Suddenly what started out as a humanitarian matter became a security issue. All of this is very contingent, very mobile and very fluid. During the Brexit campaign there was a very famous poster used by the Brexiteers of refugees marching in the Balkans as if they were marching on England and the only way to protect ourselves was to break away from Europe. The Brexit vote had much more to do with the response to the stranger arriving than with economic integration or even Brussels bureaucracy. But that image was originally produced with a very different project in mind. So even what we make of the meaning of an image is itself contingent, which is why journalists or photographers do not necessarily control what they produce.

H. A. – *Global historians and humanitarians share a commonality in that they are both sincere cosmopolitans. What do you think we should do together?*

J. A. – They come out of the same *zeitgeist*. They share a lot of the same concerns. It is remarkable that there have not been more discussions between these camps. What is happening is a new grammar, a new vocabulary of thinking about togetherness resulting more from the politics of necessity than from the curiosities from which the old cosmopolitan imaginary emerged: a fascination, a curiosity with the other. I would say that, in some senses, this was the origin of thinking about ethical connectedness. This is what Adam Smith is referring to when he writes about sentimentality.

Nowadays, we must rethink. What globalisation and climate change have produced is not just curiosity about others but dependency on others and others’ dependency on us. I am not sold on the term “anthropocene”, as if everyone were a victim in equal measure, but it is an example of how one word can intervene in our grammar and allow us to see things about a new kind of togetherness with which global historians and humanitarians are now wrestling.

Interview by Virginie Troit, Director of the French Red Cross Foundation

Biography • Jeremy Adelman

A Professor of History and Director of the Global History Lab at Princeton University. After graduating from the University of Toronto, he earned a masters' degree in economic history at the London School of Economics (1985) and completed a doctorate in modern history at Oxford University (1989). His most recent book, *Worldly Philosopher: The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman* (2013) is a chronicle of one of the 20th century's most original thinkers. Jeremy Adelman is also the editor of five books and co-author, with colleagues in the History Department and elsewhere, of *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* (4th edition, 2014), a history of the world from the beginning of humankind to the present. He has been the recipient of the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and the ACLS Frederick Burkhardt Fellowship, as well as recognitions for his pioneering teaching at Princeton.

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