



DISCOVERING LARGE CONTINENTAL EMPIRES: A HISTORIAN IN SEARCH OF SPACE

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Abstract: Adopting an autobiographical perspective, this essay explores changes in the writing and teaching of history over the past eight decades through the introduction of the comparative dimension and the interaction of history with the social sciences. Beginning with a personal account of an early encounter with history as storytelling, the essay recounts successive exposure as an undergraduate to the comparative history of revolutions and later as an assistant professor at Northwestern University to contrasting accounts of World history and modernization theory. The analysis then centers on heated controversies that raised serious questions over the bias of Eurocentrism in the history profession. In the next stage where personal and professional intellectual development coincided in the nineteen sixties at the University of Pennsylvania, the role of the social sciences assumes a growing importance. Revisions of Marx and Weber and insights from the Annales School provided powerful incentives to organize interdisciplinary seminars and collaborative publications. The site of the third stage is the Central European University in Budapest. Here a re-organization of the history faculty and the history curriculum introduces the comparative study of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe as three interrelated regions. At the same time, a related personal research agenda focuses on frontiers as an ideal spatial concept for comparative history. This leads to a broader understanding of the need to apply the geo-cultural approach of the Annales School to space outside the traditional boundaries of Europe. A research project is designed that combines a comparative study of three interrelated spatial components retaining similar features over a *longue durée*: the imperial rule of five continental multi-cultural societies sharing frontiers, re-defined as complex, and entangled in a competition to incorporate and assimilate borderlands on their peripheries. The project has produced 'three volumes commemorating a lifelong commitment to a search for historical synthesis.

Keywords: Space; Frontiers; Comparative History.

DESCOBRINDO GRANDES IMPÉRIOS CONTINENTAIS: UM HISTORIADOR EM BUSCA DE ESPAÇO

Resumo: Adotando uma perspectiva autobiográfica, este ensaio explora as mudanças na escrita e no ensino de História nas últimas oito décadas que resultaram do uso da dimensão comparativa e da interação com as Ciências Sociais no campo da História. Começando com o relato pessoal de um encontro da história como *storytelling*, o ensaio relata minha exposição, como graduando, à história comparada das revoluções e posteriormente, como professor assistente da Universidade de Northwestern, às perspectivas contrastantes da História Mundial e da Teoria da Modernização. A análise, então, se concentra em acaloradas controvérsias que levantam questões sérias acerca do eurocentrismo na profissão de historiador. Na seção seguinte, que trata do desenvolvimento intelectual profissional e pessoal na Universidade da Pensilvânia nos anos de 1960, o papel das Ciências Sociais assume importância crescente. Revisões de Marx e Weber, bem como *insights* da Escola dos Annales, forneceram poderosos incentivos para organizar seminários interdisciplinares e publicações colaborativas. O espaço da ação

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se desloca então para a Central European University, em Budapeste. Aqui, uma reorganização da faculdade de História e de seu currículo introduziram a pesquisa comparada da Europa Central, Oriental e Sudeste europeu como três regiões inter-relacionadas. Ao mesmo tempo, uma agenda de pesquisa pessoal relacionada ao tema se concentra nas fronteiras espaciais como conceito ideal para a história comparada. Isso leva a uma compreensão ampliada da necessidade de aplicar uma abordagem geocultural da Escola dos Annales para além das fronteiras tradicionais da Europa. Propôs-se então um projeto de pesquisa que combina um estudo comparativo dos três componentes espaciais inter-relacionados que mantém componentes semelhantes a uma *longue durée*: o domínio imperial de cinco sociedades multi-culturais continentais que partilham fronteiras, redefinidas como complexas e emaranhadas em uma competição para incorporar e assimilar fronteiras em suas periferias. O projeto resultante produziu três volumes, coroando um compromisso vitalício de busca por uma síntese histórica.

Palavras-chave: Espaço; Fronteiras; História Comparada.

Early Wanderings

The invitation from your journal to participate in your issue on “Comparative History and Social Systems” stimulated me to reflect on the long intellectual journey that led me to appreciate and practice comparative history. In the beginning, there was Crane Brinton. As an undergraduate in a course on the French Revolution, I came across his *The Anatomy of Revolution*, a pioneering work that still repays reading.² Later as a graduate student living in Paris, I was struck by the large number and variety of memorials associated with different often antagonistic participants and contrasting moments in the history of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic years. Only much later were my impressions given conceptual meaning by Pierre Nora’s *Les lieux de mémoires*.³ At the time, however, in January 1956, I had the good fortune to be one of the first American students to visit the Soviet Union after the war; a revelatory trip reinforced two years later by participation in the first year of the Soviet-American student cultural exchange. What impressed me in Moscow by comparison with the memorialization in Paris of the French Revolution with all its complexities and contradictions was the absence of memorials to the Russian revolution with the exception of Lenin’s tomb (then still housing Stalin). By contrast, the victory in the Second World War was everywhere celebrated in monumental memorials and place names. It was as if the

² BRINTON, Crane. **The Anatomy of Revolution**. New York, Toronto: Random House, Random House of Canada, Prentice Hall. 1965.

³ NORA, Pierre. **Les lieux de mémoires**. Paris: Gallimard, 4V, 1999-2010.

Bolshevik revolution had not only devoured its children but thoroughly digested them; in the empty space the Great Fatherland War, as the Russians called it, was allotted pride of place as the defining moment in Soviet history. Returning to Paris, the opposite was true as I anticipated; there the absence of memorials to the Second World War testified to widespread desire to forget the years marking a dark and dismal period in French history. This illustration of what today would be conceptualized as memory history brought home to me in vivid form the importance of time and space in comparative history. Unknowingly, I was then prepared for Marc Bloch and the early work of the Annales School.

Returning to the United States to take up teaching duties, I was still not fully conscious of where the path my scattered impressions were leading me. Although I had been trained as a Russian specialist at the Russian (now Harriman) Institute at Columbia, my first job obliged me to teach a variety of courses including a survey of Modern European History. Unlike many of my colleagues who then were assigned survey courses of this kind (let us recall this was the early nineteen sixties), I regarded the dominant narrative in most textbooks and curricula outlines as skewed in favor of Western Europe. (Fortunately, I only briefly had to teach the now much derided course called Western Civilization or, as the undergraduates disdainfully called it, “from Plato to NATO”). Reviewing my formative period as a historian, I recalled several fortuitous encounters with extra-European civilizations in my earlier life. Taken together they provided me with a broad range of potential units of comparison that I could employ in the classroom and later in scholarly work.

First there were the travel tales of my grandfather and grandmother. Of German birth and education, but Americanized, they were, nonetheless intrepid travelers in Latin America, the Middle East, India and the Far East in the decades before the Second World War. They brought back objets d’art of a modest but genuine sort and to them attached stories about the cultures from which they came. As an undergraduate at a small liberal arts school known for sports, the faculty took an interest in a student who preferred to write research papers about Afghanistan, Xinjiang and Manchuria that clearly devolved from my grandfather’s tales. In graduate school at Columbia, in addition to the required courses in

Russian history, I had the good fortune to attend the first class taught in the West by the now famous historian of the Ottoman Empire, Halil Inalchik. And then something of a challenge checked my headlong flight from a Europe-centered historical outlook. The shadow of world history fell across my path.

World History or Global History?

At Northwestern University my first permanent teaching position exposed me to the pioneering studies in world history launched by my colleague, Leften Stavrianos, and at the University of Chicago, William Hardy McNeil and Marshal J. S. Hodgson. While stimulated by their work, I could not help concluding, perhaps unjustly, that they were still thinking in terms of how the West shaped the world, rather than treating extra-European civilizations in their own right. But if this was to be done, then the question remained: how to conceptualize an alternative approach?

McNeill, Hodgson and Stavrianos were motivated in part by their critical attitude toward a bi-polar concept of the postwar world (that is the Cold War), growing out of their early interests which were not located in the mainstream of West European or U.S. history. All three began their scholarly careers by studying the Eastern Mediterranean, one of the most continuously dynamic regions of cross-cultural and commercial exchange in the world. They shared a common vision of the world as an integrated set of regional geographies although they disagreed on most everything else. McNeill's "world" was designed to show "how the separate civilizations of Eurasia interacted from the very beginning of their history..." He found "coherence and structure" in world history in the networks of communications and transportation and the codification of merchant law. But he proposed a fresh agenda that would follow two levels of human encounters along those networks, the first biological and ecological and the second cultural.⁴

McNeill's colleague at the University of Chicago, Marshall G.S. Hodgson adopted a "hemispheric interregional approach," in order to avoid the pitfalls of Eurocentrism that he thought weakened McNeill's work. By training an Islamicist,

⁴ MCNEILL, W. The Changing Shape of World History. **History and Theory**, v. 34, n. 2, p. 8-21, 1995. p.14, p. 21.

he stressed the development of a common stock of human techniques and cultural resources within distinctive regions that he identified with hemispheres. While he acknowledged the importance of cultural borrowing, he attributed greater importance to the internal processes of development by drawing on religious traditions that stamped each civilization with its distinctive characteristics. For Hodgson, then, Afro-Asiatic history was a world unto its own.⁵ Leften Stavrianos, originally a specialist in the Balkans, conceived of a world that was by far the most culturally pluralistic. His answer to the dilemma of Eurocentrism was to give equal time and space to the third world where he perceived the seeds of vital renewal and a source of optimism for the future development of human values.⁶ Since then his predictions have turned out to have been overly optimistic. It was a sign of the times, that none of the three left any disciples.

In the meantime two schools (or were they camps?) of world history were coming into fashion, not so much as a reaction to the Cold War as they were a part of it. They took as their respective points of departure a revival of interest in the global perspective of Karl Marx and, as a counterfoil, that of Max Weber. For these two powerful social thinkers the guiding idea of global history was not spatial but situated in a process of becoming modern. Their major re-interpreters in Western scholarship were the founders of theories of dependency and modernization. In greatly simplified terms, it would not be wholly inaccurate to define the magnetic poles around which they fashioned their world processes as the rationalization of power (military technology, bureaucracy, financial organization) and the rationalization of the economy (commercial expansion, industrial growth, entrepreneurial spirit). As might have been expected, there were more sociologists and political scientists in these camps than historians or geographers. Despite their global visions, their early debates of their epigone in the seventies and eighties took place in the academic world of Western universities. This exposed them, subsequently, to critiques by representatives of the former colonies who raised

⁵ HODGSON, Marshall. **Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History.** Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University, 1993.

⁶ STAVRIANOS, Leften. **The Promise of the Coming Dark Age.** San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976; STAVRIANOS, Leften. **The Global Rift: The Third World Comes of Age.** New York: William Morrow & Co, 1981.

their voices against the persistent Eurocentric perspectives of both dependency and modernization theories.

Initially, the modernization theorists attempted to develop a value free terminology and to employ ideal types in order to establish criteria for a universal process. Despite their best efforts, they ended up where so many of their predecessors had begun with a history of the world in which “the West” set the standards for modernity and the pace for getting there. This was particularly the case with the American social scientists who originated the theory, by revising Weber.⁷ This innate bias also undermined efforts to apply the theory objectively to the third world as it was coming to be known.⁸ Historians sought to mitigate the Euro-American centrism but could not free themselves entirely from the methodological trap.⁹ Recently historians have questioned whether the concept of modernization has been so attenuated as to have lost its explanatory value.¹⁰

More strongly influenced by Marx, the two most prominent advocates of world systems theory, Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, enjoyed a close but not uncritical intellectual relationship. For Braudel, the attraction was simply that “Marx's genius, the secret of his long sway, lies in the fact that he was the first to construct social models on the basis of a historical *longue durée*.”¹¹ But he also found Marx too schematic, a fault he also located in Wallerstein's work. Building on his magisterial study, *La Méditerranée*, Braudel undertook to write a history of the world on the basis of a variation of the *longue durée* which he called “world time.” By this he meant a temporal scale that governs certain areas of the world but not

⁷ PARSONS, Talcott. **The Social System**. New York: Free Press, 1951; PARSONS, Talcott; SMELSER, Neil. **Economy and Society**. A Study of the Integration of Economic and Social Theory. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956; PARSONS, Talcott; SHILS, Edward. **Toward a General Theory of Action**. New York: Harper & Row, 1973; ROSTOW, Walt. **Politics and the Stages of Growth**. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1971.

⁸ ALMOND, Gabriel; COLEMAN, James (Eds.). **The Politics of Developing Areas**. Princeton: Princeton University, 1960; ALMOND, Gabriel; VERBA, Sidney (Eds.). **The Civic Culture**. Princeton: Princeton University, 1963; and APTER, David. **The Politics of Modernization**. Chicago, New York: University of Chicago, 1965.

⁹ BLACK, Cyril. **The Dynamics of Modernization**. New York: Harper & Row, 1966; and BLACK, Cyril et al (Eds.). **The Modernization of Japan and Russia. A Comparative Study**. New York: Free Press, 1975; VON LAUE, Theodore. **The Global City: Freedom, Power and Necessity in the Age of World Revolutions**. Philadelphia: Lippincott 1969.

¹⁰ VVAA. AHA Roundtable, Historians and the Question of ‘Modernity’. **American Historical Review**, v. 116, n. 3, p. 631-751, 2011.

¹¹ BRAUDEL, Fernand. **On History**. Chicago: Chicago University, 1980. p. 51.

all of them. Its rhythms are set by the patterns of commercial exchange, communication and production for external markets. He was quick to point to the difference between the world economy and a world-economy (the hyphen bearing great weight). A world-economy was a relatively autonomous regional economy able to provide for most of its own needs. Such was the Mediterranean in the 16th century and Muscovy up to the 18th century. By contrast, the world economy included all human societies engaged in trade and linked by the exchange of goods. At the center of each world-economy great city arose. Thus, Braudel's history of the world began with the rise of a succession of cities as they became the focal point of a constantly growing market. He then paused in his headlong flight toward "modernity" in order to analyze the non-European regions before taking up the question of the industrial revolution and the consolidation of European hegemony.¹²

Similarly, Wallerstein shaped his theory of world history around shifting centers of economic power. This led him to devise a tripartite division of the world into center, semi-periphery and periphery. Each component of the system represented a different mode of production; the group of countries belonging to the more advanced center exercised a strong or preponderant control over economies in the semi-periphery and periphery. Furthermore, he argued that the three modes of production were linked to and dependent upon one another, each contributing to the functioning of the whole. Wallerstein concluded that although the capitalist mode of production commenced in the region exhibiting the most advantage prerequisites for growth, that is, Europe, it was a world historical phenomenon. He attributed the persistent success of Europe as the center of capitalist development to the inability of the so-called world empires like the Chinese, Persian, Ottoman and Russia to free their economies from oppressive political constraints. His description of their arrested development resembled a reformulation of Marx's Asiatic mode of production. For Wallerstein the crucial moment in the emergence of Europe (the equivalent of Braudel's world-economy) was the failure of the Habsburg Monarchy, the dominant region in the world

¹² BRAUDEL, Fernand. **Civilisation et Capitalism, 15-18ième siècles**, vol. 3: Le Temps du Monde. Paris: Armand Colin, 1979.

economy in the sixteenth century, to achieve its aim of universal empire. Consequently, Europe avoided the fate of other world-economies where a monopoly of political power stifled the growth of capitalist enterprise.¹³

Third world critics on the left pounced on the idea common to both Wallerstein and Braudel that world history began in the sixteenth century. In their view, both historians had committed the cardinal error of continuing to reserve for Europe an exceptional position and slighting the contribution of the non-Europeans to the emergence of a world economy. The race was on to shatter the symbolic frontiers of “Western civilization.”

Such figures as the Latin American Marxist, Andre Gunder Frank, the Middle East historian, Janet Abu-Lughod, and the Indian economic historian, K.N. Chauduri, argued that by the thirteenth century, if not earlier, a multi-centric Eurasian system had emerged. Europe's exceptional development rested upon its conquest of America rather than internal structural factors. Frank suggested that the coming of modernity itself must be attributed to a complex economic and cultural interaction among several parts of Eurasia rather than the result of achievements by one civilization.¹⁴ Fusing his more orthodox Marxism with a post-colonial outlook, Frank showed no mercy in criticizing Braudel and Wallerstein for their Eurocentric bias.¹⁵ World history was in the process of being re-focused once again in what some were calling, following Hodgson, Afro-Eurasian history—still not quite universal world history.

Side by side with the attempt to imagine a pre-colonial world system, other groups of global historians who projected their universalism on the post-colonial world were also beginning to emerge; some of them accepted a traditional spatial

¹³ WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. **The Modern World System**. New York: Academic Press, 3V, 1974-1989.

¹⁴ ABU-LUGHOUD, Janet. **Before European hegemony: the world system AD 1250-1350**. Nova York: Oxford University, 1989; CHAUDHURI, Kirti. **Asia Before Europe. Economy of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750**. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990; FRANK, Andre G.; GILLIS, Barry K. (Eds.). **The World System**. Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand? New York, London: Routledge, 1992; FRANK, Andre G. **ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age**. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California, 1998.

¹⁵ FRANK, Andre G. The World Economic System in Asia before European Hegemony. **Historian**, v. 56, n. 2, p. 259-76, 1994.

organization of the world based on the four continents; others were intent on smashing that framework as an invention of the Enlightenment.

More eclectic these groups of globalists were nonetheless in general agreement that historians should react creatively to the radical nature of change that characterized the period following the Second World War and accelerating in the 1970s. This could be done most imaginatively by shifting the concept of regional frontiers from a spatial and even a symbolic base to a temporal one. In Braudel's terms, they advocated accelerating the pace of "world time" exponentially, and distributing the effects of change more widely than ever before.

Yet they had to admit that the rhythmic pulse of globalization has not been uniform. The gap between world time and local time had widened in many areas of the globe. They attributed this uneven distribution of progress to the striking imbalance in the availability and use of global products. This led them to demarcate a new bipartite division of the globe along north and south rather than east and west lines.

The post-colonial global historians have adopted two methodologies that echoed those of the modernization-dependency theorists: the first was to trace back the processes that have been identified as global in scope as far as possible to their local origins. Problems immediately surfaced over selecting the key processes. They have been variously defined. One set consisted of communications technology, weapons of mass destruction, environmental problems and multinational corporations.¹⁶ Another set arose from the tension between "world-wide processes of unsettlement (the mobilization of peoples, things, ideas and images and their diffusion in space and time) and out of the often desperate efforts both locally (by communities of various kinds) and globally (by regimes of varying composition and reach) to bring them under control or, as it were, to settle them." They included the expansion of industrial forms of production and destruction; the establishment of different regimes of order ranging from empires and corporate forms of capitalism to anonymous trans-national practices; the course of

¹⁶ MAZLISH, Bruce; BUULTJENS, Ralph (Eds.). **Conceptualizing World History**. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993; MAZLISH, Bruce. Comparing Global History to World History. **The Journal of Interdisciplinary History**, v. 23, n. 3, p. 385-95, 1998.

migration, first outward from Europe and now in reverse; the growth of the nation-state and the disillusionment with politics.¹⁷

The second methodology was to de-center the disciplinary epistemologies of both history and geography on several grounds; first, by arguing that they represented the offspring of an invented tradition, the Enlightenment, that imposed a spurious unity on divergent streams of thought;¹⁸ second, by discounting them as hegemonic discourses that imposed Eurocentric modes of thought upon the rest of the world, thus denying its peoples their authentic voice;¹⁹ and third, most recently by claiming that the Enlightenment was not a European monopoly at all.²⁰

Another source of contention among the global historians was the use of sources. The post-colonial critics have also exposed the tendencies of European travelers to focus on their own heroic accounts and to discredit the native interlocutors in gathering knowledge about the non-metropolitan world.²¹ At this point, numbers of historical geographers reacted, not by retreating behind the battered defenses of positivism, but advancing into the battlefield itself and adopting the tactics of the besiegers.²²

In the meantime, historians were beginning express reservations about the entire concept of global and globalization similar to the earlier critique of modernization as the key to world history. The cudgels were taken up by specialists in large regions and regional exchanges. For the student of the African and the Atlantic-centered economy, globalization had assumed coherence and direction in seeking to understand the interconnectedness of different parts of the

¹⁷ GEYER, Michael; BRIGHT, Charles. World History in a Global Age. **American Historical Review**, v. 100, n. 4, p. 1034-60, 1995.

¹⁸ LIVINGSTONE, David; WITHERS, Charles (Eds.). **Geography and Enlightenment**. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999; GODLEWSKA, Anne. **Geography Unbound: French Geographic Science from Cassini to Humboldt**. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999.

¹⁹ SPIVAK, Gayatri. **The Post-Colonial Critic**. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues. London, New York: Routledge, 1990.

²⁰ CONRAD, Sebastian. Enlightenment in Global History, A Historiographical Critique. **The American Historical Review**, v. 117, n. 4, p. 999-1027, 2012.

²¹ RAJ, Kapil. La construction de l'empire de la géographie. L'odyssée des arpenteurs de Sa Très Gracieuse Majesté la reine Victoria en Asie Central. **Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales**, v. 52, n. 5, p. 1153-1180, 1997.

²² DRIVER, Felix; SAMUEL, Raphael. Rethinking the Idea of Place. **History Workshop Journal**, v. 39, p. v-viii, 1995.

world where there was none. Instead, the argument ran, it would be more fruitful to analyze processes that cross borders but were not universal.²³

It was in light of these debates that I slowly made my own way through the tangle of conflicting concepts about the advantages and limitations of the comparative approach to large scale units of comparison (states and societies) in particular those coterminous in time and adjacent in space that exhibited strong similarities but also differences in their modes of governance, cultural, social and institutional structures.

Comparative History and the Social Sciences

When I moved to the University of Pennsylvania in the mid-nineteen sixties, these great debates were just getting under way, their advocates filling the pages of professional journals and organizing panels at professional meetings. At Penn I was again fortunate being associated with a number of colleagues who were committed to introducing social scientific concepts into historical studies. Among them were a number of scholars who had been influenced by Marx and Weber, but who evinced little interest in embracing world or global history. They preferred to apply Robert Merton's approach of "middle range" theory to historical analysis. Originally Merton proposed a more scientific method of analysis that would obviate the futile search for an overarching independent variable that would explain all social processes yet provide a theoretical structure for purely empirical regularities.²⁴ For the historian, this suggested that the optimal approach to large scale theorizing would seek to avoid universals like modernization and globalization while rejecting narratives constructed solely on the accumulation of empirical evidence. In practical terms this meant that comparative history could yield the most illuminating results by confining its methods to rigorously defined problems. With this in mind, I joined with Lee Benson in American history and

²³ COOPER, Frederick. What is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African historian's Perspective. *African Affairs*, v. 100, n. 399, p. 189-213, 2001. Yet, compare COOPER, Frederic; BURBANK, Jane. **Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference**. Princeton: Princeton University, 2010 where he and his co-author appear to be backtracking on his insight by undertaking a general political account of all major empires without presenting a guiding comparative concept beyond the management of differences among them.

²⁴ MERTON, Robert. **Social Theory and Social Structure**. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957.

Richard D. Lambert in South Asian Studies to launch our first interdepartmental faculty seminar in comparative studies by focusing on the social and political dimensions of multi-cultural societies, beginning with the Roman Empire and coming down to the United States in the twentieth century. We followed this up with a successful application to the Mellon Foundation for a five-year grant to “Reinvigorate and Revitalize the Social Sciences.” The aim was to organize a set of interdisciplinary seminars that might serve as models for a reconstruction of university wide curricula. The seminar in which I was involved, on “Technology and Culture”, brought together faculty from many departments in the College including History, Economics, Political Science, Literature, Anthropology, and Sociology along with representatives from the professional schools, Engineering, Wharton, Annenberg School of Communications and Law.²⁵ The ambition was laudable but given institutional interests and inertia probably unrealizable. While the experiment fell short of expectations at the university level, it did influence a number of faculty members to introduce interdisciplinary courses in their departments.

The effect on my thinking as chair of the History Department was profound. I introduced a new structure for graduate training which required a comprehensive oral exam in two fields, the traditional subject area in history and a social science. As an experiment it too was probably “a bridge too far.” I recognized that the other disciplines were not fully prepared to enter into a fruitful dialogue with history and accommodate our students in their discipline. What we would later identify as differences arising from the shift in the social sciences away from the classic theorists like Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Mannheim, for example, to model building and highly quantitative data analysis. Moreover, the institutional culture was not conducive to interdisciplinary cooperation at that time. What an individual might aspire to, an institution would resist. However, in the History Department we sought to maintain a role for the social sciences in training our students along the lines suggested by Merton. My own contribution was a team-taught course in Comparative Bureaucracies (Russia, France and China) with two

²⁵ For the results of the seminar on Technology and Culture see the special issue of **Science in Context**, v. 8, n. 2, 1995.

colleagues in the department who were economic historians, Martin Wolfe for France and Robert Hartwell for China.

The next turn in the road to comparative history was for me unexpected. I was invited to participate in one of the first joint American-Soviet research seminar to emerge in late perestroika organized by Hugh Ragsdale and V.N. Ponomarev in Washington D.C. It produced a volume, *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, which by its title did not suggest a comparative approach. However, I was encouraged to contribute a broadly based analysis of what I called “persistent factors” in Russian foreign policy that established the basis for my later research and writing on the comparative history of empires.²⁶ My second contribution to the volume was, in fact, comparative. It was the first attempt to compare the literature on Russian foreign policy in five great traditions: the imperial Russian and Soviet, German, French, English and American.²⁷ This exercise enabled me to discern the role of space and time in the evolution of scholarly thinking about Russian foreign policy and the explanatory power of national traditions to shape a vision of Russia that corresponded in many ways to the policies followed by their respective governments. My hope was that my emphasis of persistent as opposed to permanent factors would shift the argument on Russian foreign policy away from what I called the three myths of unlimited expansion to a more nuanced perception that would take into account the country’s multi-cultural character, relative economic backwardness, cultural alienation and permeable frontiers. But current thinking in the corridors of power in Europe and the United States has disappointed that hope.

When I took up my duties at the Central European University in Budapest in 1995, I sought to implement some of the lessons I had learned about the value of comparative history. Undaunted by the resistance I had faced at the University of Pennsylvania, I devised the first graduate program for the History Department at CEU which was then approved and certified by the Board of Regents of the

²⁶ RIEBER, Alfred. Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay. In: RAGSDALE, Hugh (Ed.). **Imperial Russian Foreign Policy**. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Woodrow Wilson Center, Cambridge University, 1993. p. 315-59.

²⁷ RIEBER, Alfred. The Historiography of Imperial Russian Foreign Policy: A Critical Survey In: RAGSDALE, Hugh (Ed.). Op. Cit., p. 360-444.

University of State of New York and subsequently by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and the Hungarian Accreditation Committee . The program created a tripartite organization of the faculty and curriculum based on the spatial and temporal “imagining” of three regions, Eastern, Central, and Southeastern Europe in the early modern and modern period (circa 1450-present). As a university exclusively intended for graduate training, students would be obliged to select two out of the three regions for comparison in their comprehensive oral exam for the Master’s degree. Similarly, students would also identify two of the regions for their oral field exam as a prerequisite for entering the doctoral program. The MA thesis and the doctoral dissertation were not required to have a comparative component; that would have prolonged the degree granting program beyond the resources of the university or the financial resources of the students who in all cases required scholarships to attend. But it was expected that the introduction to the theses would contain a theoretical section which would reflect exposure to the course work and additional reading.

Several aims guided this program. First, it was designed to match the intellectual interests of the student body, which was recruited overwhelmingly from these regions. Second, it sought to provide a substitute and corrective to the ideological bias of communist higher education in the social sciences and humanities without embracing the opposite extreme of nationalist narratives. Consequently, no course was designed to deal exclusively with the history of an individual nation state. A required course in historiography introduced students to the range of approaches to history from Ranke to the present covering the most recent innovative “turns” in the writing of history from the “cultural turn” to the “spatial turn,” women’s history, quantitative history, micro-history, and discourse analysis. At the doctoral level, a team-taught seminar would provide the students with a wide range of social science models on comparison, broadened to include the include the role of “entanglements” and “transfers.” I was able to strengthen the structural component of the program by hiring a number of recurrent visiting faculty from universities in Croatia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Ukraine history, all of whom were committed to new approaches to history.

In the course of designing and implementing the new curriculum, the theoretical problem arose of delimiting the three regions. An inter-departmental debate was inspired by the attempt of Milan Kundera to redefine Central Europe. At the heart of Kundera's interpretation was his insistence that the lands between the German and Russian powers were distinguished by their aspiration for independence from both and a commitment to democratic principles.²⁸ A number of Hungarian historians like István Bibó had foreshadowed this view after the Second World War and the first chair of the History Department at CEU, and my colleague Péter Hanák adapted this perspective also in his vivid recreation, tinged with nostalgia, of the cultural life of the Habsburg Monarchy.²⁹ But the question remained of whether this noble vision could sustain the burden of explaining the shared and the distinctive characteristics of the three regions as we had alternatively identified them in our discussions.

An opportunity for me to explore further the problem of situating the tripartite set of regions in a spatial and temporal context came from Jurgen Kocka, the distinguished comparative historian at Berlin. He recommended me to the board of editors of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* to contribute a piece on comparative frontiers.³⁰ My two points of departure were: first, the original frontier essay of Frederick Jackson Turner as it had been revised by American historians over the previous century, sometimes to the point of refutation; second, I borrowed heavily from the still influential work of Owen Lattimore, which I had first encountered as an undergraduate in my preoccupation with extra-European history. Together with the inspiring work of Professor Inalcik, I constructed a comparative model of frontiers, always guided by

²⁸ KUNDERA, Milan. The Tragedy of Central Europe. *New York Review of Books*, v. 31, n. 7, p. 33-8.

²⁹ BIBÓ, István. The distress [misery] of east European small states. *In*: NAGY, Karoly (Ed.). **Democracy, revolution, self-determination**: selected writings. Boulder, New York: Atlantic Research and Publications, Columbia University, 1991; SZÚCKS, Jenő. The Three Historical Regions of Europe. An Outline. *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungarica*, v. 29, n. 2-4, p. 131-84, 1983; HANÁK, Péter. Central Europe. A Historic Region in Modern Times. *In*: SCHÖPFLIN, George; WOOD, Nancy (Eds.). **In Search of Central Europe**. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1989. p. 57-69; HANÁK, Péter. **The Garden and the Workshop**. Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest. Princeton: Princeton University, 1998.

³⁰ RIEBER, Alfred. The Frontier in History. *In*: SMELSER, Neil; BATES, Paul (Eds.), **The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences**, vol. 9. Amsterdam, New York: Elsevier, 2001. p. 5812-5815.

Marc Bloch's counsel that the most fruitful comparisons are made between temporally congruent and spatially and adjacent subjects.³¹ The delimitation of the three regions would then be undertaken as a methodological and theoretical study of the nature of their frontiers variously conceived in cultural and political terms. The pedagogic task of designing and realizing a new curriculum for graduate studies then led me to place spatial concepts at the center of my research agenda.

It is well over a hundred years ago that Frederick Jackson Turner published his now world famous influential essay on the frontier in American history. The great explanatory power of his vision resided in its claim to explain the uniqueness of American civilization.³² Paradoxically, it also became a model for scholars seeking to adopt or refute its implications for a whole series of different societies that shared, however, the similar feature of a moving frontier. Turner's concept, then, still serves as the main frame of comparative approaches to frontiers in world history. This is not surprising. Given the large number of American historians and the academic culture of methodological restlessness in the U.S., it is no wonder that the main changes in conceptualizing the history of frontiers has been dominated by revisions of Turner's original thesis.³³ As a result, a triptych of Turner iconography has emerged. Flanking one side of the central panel of the traditional Turner, a different spatial concept linked the rise and consolidation of the centralized state that developed out of the French experience as interpreted by the Annales School. Lucien Febvre insisted, for example, that the study of frontiers could only be carried out in connection with the nature of the state, which defines the political and military sense of the word.³⁴

³¹ BLOCH, Marc. Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes. **Revue de synthèse historique**, v. 46, p. 15-50, 1925. English translation as BLOCH, Marc. Toward a Comparative History of European Societies. In: LANE, Frederic; RIEMERSMA, Jelle (Eds.). **Enterprise and Secular Change: Readings in Economic History**. Homewood: George Allen & Unwin, 1953. p 494-521.

³² TURNER, Frederick. The Significance of the Frontier in American History. In: ____. **The Frontier in American History**. New York: Hole, Rinehart & Winston, 1920. p. 1-38.

³³ A useful review of the vast literature is ADELMAN, Jeremy; ARON, Stephen. From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States and the Peoples in Between in North American History. **The American Historical Review**, v. 104, n. 3, p. 814-41, 1999.

³⁴ FEBVRE, Lucien. Frontière: The Word and the Concept. In: BURKE, Peter (Ed.). **A New Kind of History from the Writings of Lucien Febvre**. London: Routledge, 1973. p. 208-18.

On the other side of the triptych a third panel represents the symbolic geographies, that is, the construction of imaginary borders on the basis of normative evaluations of the “Other.” Explicitly or implicitly symbolic frontiers have been employed since ancient times to differentiate between the civilized and the barbarian worlds. These divisions have taken many forms since then. Some of them have been dualist like Europe and Asia (or Occident and Orient) others have been triads like the three worlds of the Cold War (the West, the Communist Bloc and the Third World). Such symbolic frontiers have also been enlisted to make finer distinctions as between western and eastern Europe or the Near East, Middle East and Far East. Most of these distinctions have been made by West European and American scholars. They have met strong resistance from those outside the magic Atlantist circle or else from the new disciplinary approaches in western scholarship.

It has only been in the past half-century that anthropology, sociology and cultural studies have widened the debate over frontiers. In the nineteen fifties, the anthropologists began to engage in active field work on the margins of sedentary and nomadic societies. Owen Lattimore, although not academically trained as an anthropologist, was a pioneer in this approach. So was Frederik Barth, a professional anthropologist, whose work took a very different direction.³⁵ Geographers absorbed in local and regional studies felt the influence of their colleagues in cultural studies. They began to redefine space and frontiers in terms of linguistic and social contexts.³⁶ The so-called textual approach appealed strongly to non-European post-colonialist scholars who coined the term “textualizing the world”, meaning the mental construction of the globe and its discursive subdivisions to fit the European vision.³⁷ Both sociologists and anthropologists

³⁵ LATTIMORE, Owen. **Inner Asian Frontiers of China**. Boston: Beacon, 1950; BARTH, Frederik. **Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan**. Oslo: Brødrene Jørgensen boktr., 1953; see also his more general work, BARTH, Frederik. **Ethnic Groups and Boundaries**. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969. The work of anthropologists was later summarized in KHAZANOV, Anatoly. **Nomads and the Outside World**. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1994 with full updated bibliography.

³⁶ See for example, GODLEWSKA, Anne; SMITH, Neil. **Geography and Empire**. Blackwell: Blackwell, 1994 and LEWIS, Martin; WIGEN, Karen. **The Myth of Continents**. A Critique of Metageography. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

³⁷ SPIVAK, Gayatri. Op. Cit., p. 1-16.

explored ways in which ethnic identity and concepts of citizenship corresponded to the drawing of territorial boundaries.³⁸ Finally semioticians like Iuri Lotman perceived frontiers as “zones of cultural bilingualism.”³⁹ The more adventurous historians rapidly absorbed these insights in expanding the study of frontiers. But it must be admitted that the first theorist of the frontiers, the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner was no stranger to what is now called the multidisciplinary approach, although in his day the term had not yet been invented. Nevertheless, the last decades of the twentieth century witnessed a virtual explosion of multidisciplinary studies of frontiers. And beyond that there has been a boom in the comparative study of frontiers that always seems in one way or another to come back to Turner, if only to attempt to refute him.

The historiographical triptych outlined above provides a rough guide to the evolution of my thinking about the ecological and cultural factors that shaped frontiers throughout the Eurasian land mass. I identified three basic types of frontiers: consolidated state frontiers; dynamic frontiers of advancing settlements and symbolic frontiers. To be sure, features of two or even all three of these types coincide with one another. In order to avoid overstressing uniformities and make way for diversity of historical experiences, a variety of sub-types have also been introduced. In all cases, I concluded frontiers should be envisaged as zones distinct from linear boundaries, often highly contested by two or more state systems, harboring communities that differ culturally (ethno-linguistically) and socially from the centers of power of those state systems. To be sure, boundaries may be embedded in frontiers and frontiers may be considered boundaries of a sort. That is, the political or territorial delimitation may run more or less closely to the features of physical geography or ethno-linguistic divisions. Or by contrast they may have little or no correspondence to either geography or culture but rather

³⁸ BRUBAKER, Rogers. **Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany**. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992 and MACDONALD, Sharon (Ed.). **Inside European Identities**. Ethnography in Western Europe. Providence: Berg Publishers, 1993.

³⁹ LOTMAN, Ju.; and USPENSKII, Boris. The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (Up to the End of the Eighteenth Century). In: ___; ___ (Eds.). **The Semiotics of Russian Culture**. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1984. p. 3-35.

designate the limits of military conquest.⁴⁰ As a sub-text, I proceeded to employ this comparison to construct a model of Eurasia, its frontiers and borderlands that I hoped would contribute to a better understand of the origins of the Cold War, and the symbolic invention and material construction of the Iron Curtain.

In retrospect, I realize that a creative tension had developed during my pursuit of comparative frontiers in my research and writing, on the one hand, and the constructive of a pedagogic program. The first was more extensive in space and time, extending beyond Europe in the modern period; the second was restricted to three regions of Europe, albeit with extra European inputs, primarily in the form of transfers of ideas and people. How did I seek to resolve the tension? The answer emerged in the form of a project to write a history informed by a different dimension of space and time that surmounted the limits of a Eurocentric approach yet did not aspire to encompass the world. To this end I revived, revised rather drastically and combined three theoretical approaches to the relationship between history and geography.

One had been developed by three major German geographers of the nineteenth century, Carl Ritter, Friederich Ratzel and Wilhelm Humboldt.⁴¹ Their ideas had been reshaped subsequently, in the hands of Anglo-American publicists at the turn of the twentieth century into a new theory of international relations called geopolitics. They originated the idea that imperial Russia aspired to control over the Eurasian land mass that would provide the resources and strategic advantage necessary to achieve global hegemony. On that basis, post-World War II American intellectuals and government advisers re-interpreted this approach by inserting the ideological factor of international communism to lay the foundations for the containment policy.⁴²

⁴⁰ A stimulating study indicates that “a basic distinction between frontiers which are zones of settlement and frontiers which constitute political barriers is apparent in most frontier historiography.” POWER, Daniel. Introduction. In: ___; STANDEN, Naomi (Eds.) **Frontiers in Question**. Eurasian Borderlands, 700-1700. London: Macmillan, 1999. p. 1-12. p. 12.

⁴¹ KJELLEN, Rudolph. **Grundriss zu einem System der Politik**. Leipzig: Der S. Hirzel Verlag, 1920. p. 40 ff.

⁴² SPYKMAN, Nicholas. **The Geography of the Peace**. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944 and GERACE, Michael. Between MacKinder and Spykman: Geopolitics, Containment and After. **Comparative Strategy**, v.10, n. 4, p. 347-64, 1991; WOODS, Randall. **Fulbright**. A Biography. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Cambridge University, 2006. p. 141. The work of Spykman and MacKinder still occupied an important place in the education of American military officers in the

The second, in opposition to the first as it were, derived from the work of pioneers of the Annales School, especially Paul Vidal de la Blache, and Lucien Febvre. Their contribution might be called geo-cultural. The basic underlying assumption here is that physical geography presents possibilities as well as imposing constraints on human action. Avoiding the trap of geographic determinism, the geo-cultural approach, while granting the influence of the environment on the emergence of “privileged places,” leaves ample space for the role of cultures, collective communities and the rationalizing actions of rulers.⁴³

The third, civilizational approach belonged originally to a small group of Russian émigrés in Prague who dubbed themselves “Eurasianists.” They interpreted the historical role of Russia as pursuing a course of civilization-blending between Europe and Asia to bring spiritual unity of the world.⁴⁴

My original training in Russian history had emphasized its place in European history, but I now realized that different concepts of Russia’s spatial location required integration into the history of the land mass known as Eurasia. Yet I was not prepared to accept this term either in its geo-political overly determinist interpretation or its spiritual-mystical vocation. There remained geo-cultural approach; but the *annalistes* had never applied their thinking to Eurasia. I then faced the need to construct a new spatial imaginary, blending the physical, cultural and civilizational elements into a coherent whole.

latter years of the Cold War. See Department of Geography, **Readings in Military Geography**. West Point: United States Military Academy, 1981. For the geopolitical approach see for example LIEVEN, Dominic. **Empire**. The Russian Empire and Its Rivals from the Sixteenth Century to the Present. London: John Murray, 2003, especially chapter six; LEDONNE, John. **The Russian Empire and the World, 1700-1917**. The Geopolitics of Expansionism and Containment. New York: Oxford, 1997 and HAUNER, Milan **What is Asia to Us?** Russia’s Asian Heartland Yesterday and Today. London: Routledge, 1992.

⁴³ DE LA BLACHE, Paul V. **Tableau de la géographie de la France**. Paris: Table Ronde, 1903, 1979, 1994; SNAGUIN, André-Louis. **Vidal de la Blache**. Un génie de la géographie. Paris: Belin, 1993. especially p. 327-33 and FEBVRE, Lucien. **La terre et l’évolution humaine**. Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1922, 1949. p. 339 and passim.

⁴⁴ RIASANAVOSKY, Nicholas. The emergence of Eurasianism. **California Slavic Studies**, v. 4, p. 39-72, 1967; VINKOVETSKY, Ilya; SCHLACKS JR., Charles (Eds.). **Exodus to the East**: Forebodings and Events. An Affirmation of the Eurasians. Idyllwild: [s. n.], 1996. and VINKOVETSKY, Ilya. Classical Eurasianism and Its Legacy. **Canadian-American Slavic Studies**, v. 34, n. 2, p. 125-40, 2000. The revival began even earlier with the work of GUMILOV, Lev. **Iz istorii Evrazii**. Moscow: [s. n.], 1993 and his **Drevnaia Rus’ velikaia step’**. Moscow: [s. n.], 1997; DUGIN, Aleksandr. **Misterii Evrazii**. Moscow: [s. n.], 1996; see also the journal **Vestnik Evrazii**.

Eurasia

Imagining Eurasian space required a separate set of analytical categories. My starting point was to locate the formative geocultural circumstances that gave unity to the Eurasian space. I found it in the long history of contact between nomadic and settled populations dating back to the earliest times when the Roman, Sasanian and Ming empires represented the settled agricultural societies. The main features of this contact required me to refine my definition of frontier types (consolidated state frontiers; dynamic frontiers of advancing settlements and symbolic frontiers) in order to emphasize their interactive (or entangled) relationships. For several millennia, the military superiority of the nomadic horseman armed with the complex bow dominated the contest for hegemony in Eurasia, reaching its greatest extent under the Mongol Empire and slowly declining thereafter. Gradually, the settled agricultural communities overcame the disadvantages of extended space through military innovation (the so-called gunpowder revolution) and advances in techniques of mobilizing human and financial resources for purposes of waging war.

By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Eurasian space was mainly organized into multi-cultural states shaped by four historical processes; first, large scale population movements including migration and colonization which scattered and mixed a great variety of culture groups over vast distances; second the formation of stable state institutions under divinely endowed rulers, based on growing numbers of permanent officials (bureaucrats) and professional armies; third an impulse to expand beyond the original centers of power leading to frequent inter-state conflict, the conquest and absorption under imperial rule of territories on their peripheries; and fourth, the periodic eruption of internal struggles by subjugated peoples to maintain their cultural integrity against linguistic assimilation and religious conversion, preserve autonomy or regain independence. My conclusion then was that Eurasia as a concept, like frontiers, was better understood as a geographic imaginary that had to be redefined in spatial and temporal terms as the product of large-scale historical processes.

Complex Frontiers

Focusing on Eurasian space required a revised interpretation of frontiers. By limiting my comparison to the frontiers along the peripheries of the major contestants for supremacy in Eurasia, I identified a number of similar characteristics that enabled me to call them complex. The most salient features which distinguished them was a spatial location where: first, three or more multi-cultural conquest states engaged over long periods of time in military conflict and where communities on both sides of the frontier engaged in raiding, trading and cultural exchange; second, official boundary lines cut across ethno-linguistic and religious lines of identification among the local communities; third, unstable and turbulent relations between the frontier communities and the centers of power centered on questions of assimilation and acculturation giving rise to a variety of survival strategies, ranging from silent resistance to outright rebellion. Finally, complex frontiers did not exist in isolation. Events along one of these frontiers could and often did resonate in other adjacent frontiers.

While sharing these broadly defined common characteristics, complex frontiers also displayed differences within regions, reflecting variations in the physical landscape and nature of human activities, along a broad band of territory stretching from the Baltic to the Sea of Okhotsk. Employing the comparative method of weighing similarities and differences, I assembled seven complex frontiers: the Baltic Littoral, Triplex Confinium or West Balkans, Danubian Basin, Pontic Steppe, Caucasian Isthmus, Trans-Caspia and Inner Asia.⁴⁵ Admittedly, these were the imaginings of an historian, rather than cartographic lines yet their individual characteristics enabled me to address important questions on the evolution of power relationships and social movements from the rise of early modern empires to the outbreak of the First World War.

The Russian Empire was involved directly in the formation and evolution of all the complex frontiers except the Triplex Confinium where it gradually expanded its indirect intervention throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The other continental empires faced fewer complex frontiers in Eurasia — three

⁴⁵ RIEBER, Alfred. *The Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers*, In: MILLER, Alexei; ___ (Eds.). **Imperial Rule**. Budapest: Central European University, 2004. p. 177-208.

for the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, two for the Iranian and only one, Inner Asian, for the Qing. However, this latter group was exposed as well to direct contact with frontiers outside Eurasia. For them the phenomenon of what might be called the outer or double frontier with the imperial overseas powers of Western Europe, primarily France and Great Britain, immensely complicated their competition on their land frontiers. Even Russia was indirectly affected by the imperial policies of the West, although it lacked an extensive seacoast or any land frontier with the Western powers.

The complex frontiers were the sites of periodic often prolonged wars, accompanied by mass population movements which determined in the long term the relative power positions of the multicultural states in their struggle to secure their borderlands. The chronology of these wars falls into two periods. From the sixteenth to the mid-late eighteenth century the major multi-cultural states, the Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman, Safavid, Qing and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were all players in the game. They still competed on more or less equal terms and continue to enjoy moments of revival and expansion. Thereafter, the balance began to tilt in favor of a Russian ascendancy which, while not uniform or unbroken, continued to the last decades of the nineteenth century. At the same time, changes were taking place within the frontier communities. Among some the tendency was to assimilate; among other a tendency was to seek unity with their brethren across the boundary line or within their borderland on the basis of autonomy. The impulse for autonomy was not yet infused with nationalist sentiments; that was only to come during the nineteenth century and more gradually than many nationalist historians are willing to admit. Throughout both periods, attempts to fix boundaries through international treaties failed to stabilize them, prolonging the formation of nation-states. Porous and contested frontiers remained a disruptive element not only in the relations among states but also between the imperial centers of power and the borderlands. The cataclysm of World War I did not resolve but in some ways intensified the problems spawned by complex frontiers in the struggle over the borderlands in its post-imperial phase.

Borderlands

To complete an analysis of the conceptualization of space in geo-cultural terms it remained to fit the borderlands into the general schema. Conquest Eurasian empires, competing for space and seeking security, carved out of their frontiers and incorporated into their imperial system as separate administrative units, sometimes enjoying a degree of autonomy, territories of different and varied cultural composition which may be called borderlands. The five major Eurasian empires displayed over the course of their existence similar patterns in the location of their borderlands. The titular population at the center of power was encircled by territories inhabited by different ethno-linguistic groups. For example, the periphery of the Russian Empire at its height was composed of territories inhabited by Finns, Poles, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Kazakh Turcoman, and Siberian tribes. Similarly, the borderlands of China were peopled by Manchus, Mongols, to the north, Uighurs and other Turkic peoples to the west and tribes in Yunnan to the southwest.

The incorporation of a borderland into a multi-cultural state did not mean the end of the struggle over its political or cultural identity. Instead, it continued to be the object of struggles played out on two levels: externally with rival states and internally with the conquered peoples. Thus, borderlands faced frontiers in two directions; an inner cultural frontier turned toward the center of state power and an outer, inherently unstable military frontier facing territories contested by rival powers.⁴⁶ The web of relationships between borderlands and the core was highly complex and underwent extensive changes over time. If the Eurasian Empires were the objects of an Orientalist gaze from the West, then it is also true that they shared an Orientalist (or “barbarian”) perception of their own borderlands as culturally inferior or incapable of governing themselves.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ MILLER, Alexei. The Empire and the Nation in the Imagination of Russian Nationalism. *In*: ___; RIEBER, Alfred (Eds.). **Imperial Rule**. Budapest: Central European University, 2004. p. 9-26.

⁴⁷ Cf. MAKDISI, Ussama. Ottoman Orientalism. **The American Historical Review**, v. 107, n. 3, p. 1-32, 2002. and VAN DER OYE, David S. **Russian Orientalism**. Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration. New Haven: Yale, 2010; FERENCZY, Mary. Chinese Historiographers' Views on Barbarian-Chinese Relations (14-16th centuries). **Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae**, v. 21, n. 3, p. 353-62, 1968.

Logically, the term borderland implies the existence of a core. Paradoxically, it is more difficult to arrive at a satisfactory spatial definition of core than it is of borderlands. In line with the geo-cultural approach core may be defined as a space shaped by the exercise and symbolic display of power. Its main components were the ruler, the court, the army command, the administrative offices and the main residences of the ruling elite.

In all these cases, the acquisition of borderlands was a prolonged and uneven process; their attachment was never secure; in the case of the Ottomans especially there was a constant loss of the borderlands after the late seventeenth century (the Great Morean War). All the empires lost many or most of their borderlands from 1914 to 1920 with partial and temporary recovery in the case of the Soviet Union and full recovery for China.

The Trilogy

Working out the implications of these comparative spatial concepts for the rise and demise of the multicultural empires was the challenge that led me to the idea of three volumes that would examine key aspects of the struggle for hegemony in Eurasia from the rise of the early modern empires to the Second World War.

The first book in the trilogy on the struggle for supremacy in Eurasia between the Russian, Habsburg, Ottoman, Safavid-Qajar and Qing Empires was constructed around the three foci of my teaching and research on comparative history: the nature of imperial rule, the interaction (or entanglement) of empires along complex frontiers, the formation of borderlands and their relationship to the centers of imperial power.⁴⁸

The nature of imperial rule focused on three fundamental elements: the political religion of imperial ideologies; imperial bureaucracies and imperial armed forces. In delineating five complex frontiers (Baltic Littoral, West Balkans, Pontic Steppe, South Caucasus and Inner Asia), I sought to characterize them as shifting, military, multi-cultural, overlapping and interactive. The borderlands that emerged

⁴⁸ RIEBER, Alfred. **The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands**. From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014.

from the inter-imperial conflicts along these frontiers were variously incorporated under imperial rule but never fully integrated. The tension between the borderlands and center revolved around linguistic, confessional, economic and broadly cultural issues. By the turn of the twentieth century, serious crises were breaking out in all the five empires. The impact of World War challenged the capacity of imperial rule to survive and ultimately brought them all down. Their destruction, however, left unresolved questions with which their successor states were forced to confront.

The aim of the second volume in the trilogy, *Stalin and the Struggle for Eurasia*, was to demonstrate how the Soviet Union revived many features of imperial rule enveloped in a radically transformed ideology and continued to be engaged in a struggle along its frontiers with the successors states, which had been imperial borderlands like Finland, or parts thereof like West Belorussia, West Ukraine (Eastern Poland) and Bessarabia. Under Stalin the idea of world revolution became transformed into a re-creation of imperial rule not only over former borderlands but expanded in a series of concentric circles of control into Eastern Europe and the Chinese borderlands of Outer Mongolia and Xinjiang.⁴⁹

Region

The third volume, now in the process of publication, *The Adriatic: Clash of Imperial Visions during the Second World War*, shifts the focus to one complex frontier (Western Balkans) which I re-conceptualized as a region in order to bring a different set of problems into bolder relief. The spatial imaginary of region has, like frontiers, stimulated a long debate. I have been guided, once again, by insights from the annalists who to cite Lucien Febvre have argued that what is important is not to define the region per se, that is, in terms of its physical dimensions) but the questions one asks— *le problematique* —about its historical significance.⁵⁰ Three questions shaped my approach to the Adriatic region. First, how is it possible to

⁴⁹ RIEBER, Alfred. *Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2015.

⁵⁰ FEBRVE, Lucien. *La terre et l'évolution humaine*. Introduction géographique à l'histoire. Paris: A. Michel [1922], 1970. For a similar sentiment see Febvre's companion in arms, Marc Bloch; "unity of place is a confused idea; only unity of the problem is central." BLOCH, Marc. *Annales d'histoire économique et social*, v. 6, p. 81, 1934.

understand the recurrent conflicts over centuries between multiple great powers pursuing imperial interests and among the diverse and shifting populations in a field of struggle that centered on the Adriatic Sea and spread into its hinterlands? Second why did these conflicts reach a climax during the Second World War, plunging the region into a cauldron of violence and spawning bitter collective memories that continue to divide and haunt its people down to the present day? And finally, why did every one of the competing powers fail to impose its political or cultural hegemony over the region?

Addressing these questions, third volume in the trilogy seeks first to identify long term historical processes which I argue provided the Adriatic with its unique regional character. These were the nature of warfare, mixing conventional with irregular, low level fighting infused with religious elements; mass population movements including migration, colonization, flight and resettlement; and the prolonged and incomplete process of state-building. Second, the book demonstrates how these processes reaching a climax in the trauma of the First World War, depositing a legacy of unresolved problems that deeply affected the societies and institutions of the successor states. As a result, in the decades preceding and during the Second World War, radical visions of social and political change fueled a renewed struggle for hegemony in the region. The men and policies embodying these visions form the themes of the book. By vision is meant a transformative idea projected into an indeterminate but not unattainable future, combined with a will, an energy, and a capacity to achieve its aims through action. In the post-First World War period, new leaders emerged outside the traditional elites to fashion these radical visions and lead their followers into a ferocious struggle during the Second World War. Mussolini, Hitler, Tito and Stalin embodied elements of previous imperial rule but manipulated them through a discursive style and mass mobilization that incited violent transformation of institutions and social arrangements. My preference for the term vision as an object of contemplative imagination and derivative action stems from a search for a more complex explanatory formula than those limited to ideological, geopolitical or other mono-causal factors and to avoid the often sterile debates of over whether one or the other of these factors was preponderant in policy making. Vision

combines an appreciation of the interplay among all these factors as fashioned by the new leaders.

The fulfillment of imperial visions fueled the drive for hegemony by one dominant social group over others in the process of expanding or reconstructing a state. This process has often acquired the descriptive term of ethnic cleansing or class war which may at times be imprecise. It could mean deportation or extermination; but it could also mean forced cultural assimilation. In the Adriatic region there were examples of both.

During the Second World War, the clash of imperial visions in the Adriatic region exhibited several unique features. Nowhere else in Europe did Italian fascism, Nazi racism, Soviet communism and integral nationalism engaged with one another in conventional, irregular and civil wars; nowhere else did civil wars take the extreme forms of inter-communal violence and killings.⁵¹ In an epilogue I suggest that the destructive effects of this paroxysm contributed to the failure of the imperial vision of the Soviet Union in the region and the collapse of Yugoslavia and the current crisis in the region.

In retracing the steps of my odyssey, I conclude that there was no predetermined pattern, as there is none in historical processes. There were always choices to be made; paths not taken. Yet there were also predispositions, inclinations, suggesting that there was a high degree of probability in my following certain lines of inquiry that led me to where I am today.

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ABU-LUGHOUD, Janet. **Before European hegemony: the world system AD 1250-1350**. Nova York: Oxford University, 1989.

⁵¹ The only other candidates for this dubious distinction were the civil wars in the western borderlands of the Soviet Union. See RIEBER, A. **Stalin...** Op. Cit., p. 256-81. The Holocaust was not a civil war but a genocidal attack on a defenseless population.

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