

Bundles of connections

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Connections in Global History

Connections between individuals or, in a second step, between groups of individuals are the basic elements of every form of social organisation. Accordingly, they play a central role in all research that looks at social formations, group interactions, questions of belonging or many other related subjects with a present-day or a historical focus. In other words, connections between individuals, between the groups they form or between their institutions are and have always been important elements of sociological, ethnographical, anthropological and historical research or, indeed, almost all humanities and social science research. Beyond this elementary (but also very general) significance, connections deserve specific attention in scholarship that is concerned with processes of integration and entanglement across certain boundaries such as cultural differences, language barriers, spatial distances or national borders to name but a few examples. In such research, connections become the principal elements of analysis (Wenzlhuemer 2020, 5–6). And yet, most scholarship builds on an understanding of connections and connectivity that is surprisingly undertheorized and ultimately rather simple. Too simple, as I will argue. In the following, I therefore propose to conceptualize connections as actual bundles of connections: twisted, interwoven and mutually impacting on each other.

I will use the research field of global history to develop my argument and I will draw on an exemplary case from this field for illustrative purposes. However, I claim that the broader points are generalizable and apply to many disciplines and research concerned with transboundary processes as exemplified above. Connections are the basic units of analysis in global history. They are the building blocks of all forms of contact, exchange and network, and questions relating to the development of such connections as well as their meaning for historical actors are, accordingly, of great interest. They are the key elements of concepts, such as transfer (Espange and Werner 1988), connected or entangled history (Subramanyam 1997; Randeria 1999; Randeria and Conrad 2002), and contact zones (Pratt 2008). Nevertheless, global connections have hardly been explicitly conceptualised in global history. Even though the term ‘connection’ is ubiquitous in global history research, it is almost always used descriptively. There are several reasons for this conceptual gap (Wenzlhuemer 2019, 110–112), one of which is our tendency to understand connections between individuals, groups or other entities mostly as binaries. Either there is a connection or there is not.

Several factors facilitate such binary conceptions. In practice, our focus and our research questions often rest more on that which is connected than on the

connection itself. Accordingly, much of the research in globalisation studies or in global history has for a long time mainly been concerned with the search for global connections and their significance for their endpoints, and less with the quality of these connections themselves. The multi-faceted and potentially even contradictory character of many connections, thus, mostly remains in the background. And our metaphors and visualizations do not help. We speak of networks, webs or grids, and we draw them with hubs and lines that symbolize connections. Sometimes the importance of connections is weighed and lines are drawn in varying thicknesses. But the approach remains a binary one. Either two points are connected or they are not.

Connective bundles

It is not overly surprising that such a binary approach to connections does not correspond with their actual role in processes of global integration or entanglement. The concept of dis:connectivity (→ **Introduction**), however, makes the conceptual short-comings of this approach all the more apparent. Dis:connectivity draws our attention to the interplay between different forms of connectivity or – ultimately – between connectivity and non-connectivity. The idea builds on the assumption that two entities – be they individuals, groups or other formations – are always connected in a variety of different ways at the very same time. Connections between them exist in the plural but, of course, not separate from each other. They are bundled together and relate to each other but the individual strands might have entirely different qualities and significances. Some strands might be dependable and capacious. Others will be ‘actively absent’ (→ **Absences**), might have been interrupted (→ **Interruptions**) or are taking unexpected detours (→ **Detours**) – this is where disconnections come in. Some strands facilitate specific forms of relation and interaction. Some work better over shorter distances. Variations can be endless and differ from context to context. But instead of single, binary connections, we are always dealing with entire bundles of connections. By a bundle I mean a whole set of connections that share the same end but are otherwise often different in character; that are twisted and interwoven like the fibres of a rope and thus interact with and depend on each other. The composition of the bundle, the way in which the individual strands are interwoven, the forms in which they impact on each other, are all extremely instructive regarding the significance of the bundle itself. Looking closer at the bundle and its strands allows us to better understand its tensions and potential contradictions and, thus, what it means for those connected through the bundle.

In the following, I will introduce a brief historical example and will try to develop it in a way that makes the bundles of global connections at play a little

more tangible. On 21 January 1886, the venerable *Times of London* published an extensive report about the current situation in Upper Burma, the northern part of present-day Myanmar. The British had annexed the region in the year before in the course of the Third Anglo-Burmese War and ever since then they faced fierce local resistance. The British government criminalized the insurgents as *dacoits* (bandits) and thought it justified to take tough action against any form of resistance. Executions were a common occurrence in Upper Burma in these days. This was a well-known and mostly unquestioned fact back in Britain. It was accepted by the British public as a necessary evil that an imperial power such as Britain had to deal with. And so the article in the *Times* reported rather matter-of-factly about ongoing executions of prisoners in Burma. Towards the end, however, the text also offered a more critical remark. It referred to a certain Reverend Colbeck, a missionary of the Church of England in Mandalay, who claimed that the local Provost-Marshall Willoughby Wallace Hooper (1837–1912) had threatened imprisoned locals with immediate execution should they not testify against others and that he took photographs at the execution of prisoners trying to capture ‘the precise moment when they are struck by the bullets.’ (Anonymous 21 January 1886, 5)

Colbeck's protest and the report in the *Times* caused a stir in British government circles. Only four days after the publication of the article, Lord Randolph Churchill, the then Secretary of State for India, had to answer questions about these incidents in the House of Commons (Hansard 1886). In a flurry of telegrams between London, Calcutta, Rangoon and Mandalay, the government and the India Office tried to establish whether there was any substance to Colbeck's accusations and, if so, to contain the political damage (House of Commons 1886, 7). In this context, the issue about pressing prisoners into testimonies soon faded into the background of the enquiry and the practice of photographing executions came to the fore. This can partly be explained by the larger ethical questions revolving around the issue. Photography was still a relatively young medium whose possible moral implications had not been fully discussed yet. However, besides these more general issues, another question became more and more apparent between the lines of the telegrams and the parliamentary debate. Should certain things be documented photographically at all and what would it mean if the photograph of an execution in Burma found its way back to Britain? How would such a photo – especially one of the precise moment at which the bullet entered human flesh – affect the public by bringing the fate of the delinquents emotionally much closer to the otherwise distant European observer? These concerns were not made explicit in the debate, but they clearly reverberate between the lines.

Between 22 January and 1 March 1886, the government tried to establish the exact facts of Hooper's alleged misconduct, to do some damage control and to prepare a formal court of inquiry into the matter (House of Commons 1886, 7).

Hooper himself never denied that he had taken pictures of executions, but claimed that he had done so on only two occasions and emphasized that, in his opinion, the delinquents had not even realized that he was doing so (Anonymous 4 March 1886, 5). Eventually, the court of inquiry held at Mandalay on 19 March 1886 came to the opinion that '[t]he conduct of Colonel Hooper [. . .] has deservedly met with public condemnation. It reflects discredit on the army to which he belongs, and is damaging to the character of the British Administration in India.' Nevertheless, taking into account that Cooper 'had already suffered severely from the consequences of his actions', he got away with nothing but a public reprimand and a temporary reduction of his pay (Anonymous 8 September 1886, 3). His further career did not suffer much from this. In 1887, he published the photographic volume *Burmah. A series of one hundred photographs* (Hooper 1887). The photos of the executions were not included in the volume.

This brief episode – which is only a small extract from Hooper's photographic engagement in colonial South Asia that encompassed many other, often equally off-putting stations and aspects (Howe 2007; Twomey 2012) – is telling in many ways. It says something about the ruthlessness of British colonialism. It reveals Hooper's colonial gaze (Pratt 2008). It highlights the contemporary ambiguousness of the new medium of photography oscillating between social documentary and mere voyeurism. And it also illustrates how in this global communication process very different forms of connections were at work at the same time and between the same actors, how they formed bundles, how the strands in this bundle interacted with each other and how they, thus, created a form of dis:connectivity that the actors had to navigate.

The plurality of connections between, in this case, the metropole and the colony, between London, Great Britain and the British public on the one side and the various actors in Burma, is immediately evident. Against a colonial backdrop, we have globally moving people such as Hooper, a British missionary or all kinds of British colonial administrators; we have things that travel such as photographic equipment; and, of course, we have information that circulates around the globe, for instance in the form of newspaper articles, telegrams or – potentially – photographs. The public and the authorities learned about Hooper's questionable behaviour in a newspaper article. While we do not know this for sure and have no way of confirming it, it is reasonable to assume that Colbeck's complaint had originally reached the *Times* by postal letter, either from Colbeck directly or via a correspondent or other intermediary. Intercontinental letters were comparatively slow but could carry quite a lot of information. After Hooper's conduct at executions had become public, two other channels came into play – the telegraph and photography.

The many telegrams between London and Burma sought to gather additional information and also aimed at doing some damage control. The British government

tried to establish what had actually happened at these executions – and whether any photographs from the executions did exist that could potentially make their way to Europe. British authorities feared the twist that the publication of such photographs could give to public opinion. Photographs could create yet another form of connection. In the late nineteenth century, they still travelled slowly but could evoke feelings of closeness and intimacy over vast cultural and geographical distances (see, for example, Dewitz and Lebeck 2001, 62–90). In short, the British government was afraid of the emotional attachment to the lot of the prisoners that such photographs could potentially arouse. Accordingly, it tried to establish whether they existed and if so, how to contain their movement to Europe. Or in other words, it tried to control one global connection with the help of another (Wenzlhuemer 2017).

The connections at play here all had vastly different qualities. They were slow and fast, textual and visual, had high and low informational densities. And there is disconnection as well. Many of the global connections in the episode only gain their meaning through their relation to a missing connection in the bundle. The government sought to contain the flow of information from Burma to Britain – and specifically that of photographs that nobody had seen and that might not even have existed. The photographic connection is ‘actively absent’. It is not there but its possibility looms large in the episode.

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