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Local History World Wide; an International Internet Inventory

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Abstract:

The Norwegian Institute of Local History is making an internet presentation of local history as it is practiced around the world. We have called the project "Local History World Wide: An International Internet Inventory" (LHWW). LHWW wants to raise awareness about the international perspectives of local history and establish a network for cooperation and exchange of knowledge between those who are active and interested in local history issues. The paper argues why local history should have an international perspective, focusing on historical explanations as well as changes in modern society. The presentation will have a short guided tour of the website. LHWW is actively seeking cooperation with local history communities around the world in order to collect information and presentations.

Please visit our web site: <http://www.localhistory.no/>

Local History World Wide an internet inventory

The Norwegian Institute of Local
History

World Wide Local History: local history with an international perspective?

The Norwegian Institute of Local History is making an internet presentation of local history as it is practiced around the world. We have called the project “Local History World Wide: An International Internet Inventory”(LHWW). LHWW wants to raise awareness about the international perspectives of local history and establish a network for cooperation and exchange of knowledge and ideas between those who are active and interested in local history issues.

That local history should take a more international perspective is perhaps, to some, a bit surprising. However, this paper will argue that an international perspective in local history is a matter of course and should be an integrated part of all local history studies. This is because international impulses have influenced choices and actions in local communities around the world at all times. It is also because international perspectives on local history, as well as comparisons, can give us new insights and explanations. Further more, an international perspective in local history studies is a way of adapting local history to some of the challenges of present-day internationalisation and globalisation.

Is there such a thing as an isolated community?

- Trade
- Migration
- War
- culture

Is there such a thing as an isolated community?

All communities, however small, have been influenced by others, also those far away. Trade, work, war and death as well as culture are some of the ways in which this occurred. Trade has always been an important form of contact, both trade with the neighbouring village, and trade with distant places. There has been trade in dried fish between the Iberian peninsula since the 14th century, peddlers have always traded home produce across borders, and since the middle ages, merchants have travelled international trading routes such as the Silk Road or the maritime trading systems in South-East Asia. The trade exchanged regional specialities and staple goods between, not only states and regions, but also villages. Exotic products, such as metals, silk and spices, as well as new technologies such as paper making was spread through towns and communities.¹

Many local communities were influenced by work migration to foreign countries. One example is the large number of emigrants from Europe and Asia to the US, which not only had national consequences, but also impacted on both the donor and recipient communities. One example is the remittances which the emigrants sent. These were often of great economic importance for the home communities. Also, local communities have experienced immigration, both from neighbouring villages and other places in the country, as well as immigration from abroad.

Another example is the impact of those travelling as part of their work. Sailors were one such group. In the 17th century they brought back new products, such as tea, which had serendipitous effects for local communities. Tea was heavily taxed in Britain until 1784, thus

¹ Aschehoug og Gyldendals Store Norske Leksikon, Oslo, 1989.; Ahlberger, C.: *Konsumpsjonsrevolusjonen. Om det moderna konsumpsjonssamhällets framväxt 1750-1900*, Humanistiske fakulteten, Göteborgs universitet, 1996; Millquist, F: "Torps handelsmän och industrigrundare del II", in *Från Boråa och de sju häraderna, 1987*, nr 40, Kulturhistoriska Förening, Sweden; Dahl, S.: "Traveling Pedlars in Nineteenth Century Sweden", in SEHR, vol VIII, nr. 1, 1960; Ashita, T: From the Ryukyu to the Hong Kong Networks, in Sogner, S: *Making Sense of Global History*, Universitetsforlaget 2001

it was profitable to smuggle it into the country through the coves along the coasts of Kent, Sussex and the Western country. Locals collected the tea chests, and before the tea was passed on inland through the smugglers trading systems, they would take a small sample for them selves. Tea was thus spread through the British population not only from the top down, but also from the bottom, or more accurate, from poor wives and criminals in the local communities along the coast.²

International wars or wars with other countries have also had impact on local communities. Villages could be in the way of the army, as happened along the Franco-German border in World War I. The consequences for the afflicted communities were grave and far-reaching. Sons returning from service abroad also impacted their home communities, bringing with them ideas and experiences from the outside world. Disease could also be an international event with great local consequences. The Black plague is one example. It knew no borders and did not discriminate on the size of the community. The results were devastating, at times leaving whole villages empty.

The culture in local communities has not been isolated, either. Ideas from abroad have been transferred through books and letters, as well as through the education of the priests and doctors. One example is clothes and fashions. Fabrics such as woollens from Flanders³ have been traded across borders, influencing fashions in the local communities as well as stimulating to technical improvements in home production in order to compete or substitute. Fashions in Paris were spread to other cities, as well as to the European periphery. Some were just fads, but others became incorporated in the local dress customs. A second example is the spread of cotton from Asia and America in the 19th century; it was lighter and easier to wash than wool and linen, thus it influenced not only local fashion, but also improved hygiene.⁴ Music has also influenced local communities, e.g. Elvis and rock had a great impact on the lives of many young people in small communities all over the world. A final example is languages and dialects. There are many similarities and shared words between languages in regions which have had much contact.⁵ Pidgin languages have also developed in order to facilitate trade and contact in some regions. The “Pomor” language which evolved in the Barents region is one such example.⁶

Even though local societies have been influenced by international happenings and phenomenon, they have been expressed in a variety of ways reflecting the local communities they affect. Thomas Hylland Eriksen uses the Winter Olympics as an example of this. They are a global institution, but depending on which community one is in, one experiences them differently.⁷ An other example is the idea of democracy which is practiced very differently around the world.

² Wallvin, J: *Fruits of Empire, exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800*, MacMillian Press, London 1997

³ de Vries, J. og A. Van der Wooude: *The First Modern Economy, Success, Failure and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 279-90.

⁴ Hutchison, R.: *Enigheten- tekstilfabrikken i Østerdalen, Fabrikkdirift og teknologioverføring i det norske bondesamfunn på slutten av 1700- tallet*, Hovedoppgave i historie, UiO, 2003.

⁵ van Voss, L. Heerma: North Sea Culture, 1500-1800, in *The North Sea and Culture (1500-1800)*, 1996, p. 25

⁶ Broch, I. and E. H. Jahr: *Russenorsk- et pidginspråk i Norge*, Novus, Trømsø, 1981; Broch, I.: ”Davai po skip kom, brat! Russenorsk- kontaktspråket mellom nordmenn og russere i nord”, in Büchten, D., T. Dzijakson, J.P. Nielsen (red): *Norge- Russland. Naboer gjennom 1000 år*, Scandinavian Academic Press, 2004, p. 94-95; Schrader, T.: ”Pomorhandelen”, in *ibid.*, p. 92-93.

⁷ Eriksen, T. H. *Small places, large issues. An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Pluto Press, London, 1995, p. 285.

Global trends pushed and pulled

- Spread of the market economy
- Rise of consumerism

Global trends pushed and pulled

Demand and supply, as well as trends and changes in society have always influenced local communities in some way or another. These factors both pulled and pushed, steadily increasing and strengthening the ties, and sometimes mutual dependence between global trends and local communities.

Warfare, as well as increased trade within Europe and with distant continents had serendipitous effects even in the farthest places. One example was the increased demand for ships due to the growth in European trade, as well as international exploration and colonization. This led to increased demand for metals, which again not only led to growth in iron works in e.g. Sweden, but also to the migration of many Swedish peasants to previously sparsely populated areas in order to become involved in supplying fire wood for the iron works.⁸ Another example is the Spanish and Portuguese, who in the 14th and 15th centuries financed their expansion by exploitation of metals and other natural resources from South America. This impacted on local native-American communities. Many died due to the, for them, foreign diseases brought from Europe, whilst others were used as slave labour to reap the lands riches. In the end, this had had catastrophic effects for native-American local communities.⁹ The Opium War in China is a third example of how global trends pushed local communities to take part in global trends. Europe's demand for Chinese goods led to a ruthless strategy of supplying opium to the Chinese people in the early 19th century. The growth in opium addiction weakened decision making structures, as well as traditions in the local Chinese communities, thereby removing some of the major barriers for the European

⁸ Söderberg, J.: "A Long-Term Perspective on Regional Economic Development in Sweden, C.a. 1550-1914", in SEHR, vol XXXII, nr. 1, 1884, p. 9-16.

⁹ Diamond, G: *Guns, Germs and Steel, a short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years*, Vintage, London, 1998.

traders. Thus in many ways, Chinese local communities were forced to relate to the rest of the world.¹⁰

Global trends and events have also pulled peasants and local communities to participate in the gradually developing world market. In the 18th century demand for timber, led to new opportunities for income for peasants in peripheral, but forested parts of Europe, such as Russia. Timber was cut down in e.g. Arhangel'sk and Karelia, and transported to Amsterdam or other large, European cities where it was used to build ships going to Asia or Africa. The wages which the lumberjacks and all others involved in the trade earned, made it possible for them to partake in a growing consumer market.¹¹

The new incomes could be spent on the new products from Asia and America, such as cotton, porcelain, sugar, tobacco, potatoes, coffee and tea. Today we take these products for granted, however, their impact on local communities should not be underestimated. Sugar and potatoes had great effects on local diets, dishes, dental health and nutrition. Tobacco also had impacts on the local communities, both by becoming a new source of income for those who grew and traded it, but especially by creating addicts. Coffee, tea and sugar also create their own demand. The new products became important parts of many social rituals and gatherings in local communities. Can you even imagine a family gathering without coffee and sugared cake? Or a local pub without smokers (either they have to stand outside like in Norway and Ireland, or are permitted to smoke inside as in Denmark and Russia)?

The need for new incomes, as well as the wish to consume can lead to a reorganisation of household resources. In the 18th and 19th centuries this took the form of increased efficiency and work. In Europe, increased efficiency occurred as technological improvements, such as the increased mechanization of agriculture which had far reaching effects on rural society. Increased work could take form as reorganisation of the work through specialization as many farmers in Sleswig-Holstein did when they chose to focus on meat production. Many also began utilizing formerly unemployed labour resources, such as children and old people. Further more, time spent working increased in 16th century because the protestant reformation removed a number of holidays.

The increased efficiency could lead to an economic surplus in the household which was spent on necessary staple goods, but also on consumer goods such as ribbons or tobacco. However, specialization also led to less time for the household to be self sufficient, thereby increasing the demand for pre-fabricated goods. Together the drives to consume and produce fed into and onto them selves. For the local community and the individual household this meant that people spent more time working, but also that more products were available on the market making it possible to specialize.¹² Local specialised techniques and products became important in order to have a competitive edge, such as Meckelburgian wool in the early modern period, and Parma ham or Champagne today.

¹⁰ Nordborg, L.-A.: "Det sterke Europa 1815-1870", in Helle, K., J. Simensen, S. Tägil, K. Tønnesson (red); bind 11, *Aschehougs Verdenshistorie*, Aschehoug, Oslo, 1986, p. 101-102.

¹¹ Palmer, R.R., J. Colton: *A History of the Modern World*, Mc Graw-Hill, USA, 1995, p. 261; Peresadilo, R.: "Særtrekk ved Pomorhandelen i Nord-Norge 1814-1917", in Büchten, D., T. Dzjakson, J.P. Nielsen (red): *Norge- Russland. Naboer gjennom 1000 år*, Scandinavian Academic Press, 2004.

¹² de Vries, J. og A. Van der Wooude: *The First Modern Economy, Success, Failure and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815*, Cambridge, 1997.

Comparisons teach us more about ourselves

- No matter where or when they lived, people have always occupied themselves with obtaining food, shelter and material things to sustain themselves and improve their living standard.
- Local history: closer to the details, making it easier to have a cross-border approach
- Details become more clear
- Equal partners

Comparisons teach us more about ourselves

No matter where or when they have lived, people have always occupied themselves with obtaining food, shelter and material things in order to sustain and improve their standard of living. Comparisons of how these common challenges have been met in different local communities may explain why they have evolved so differently or so similarly. Global historians usually restrict their studies to materialistic approaches because of the danger of generalisation due to the aggregated levels of their studies.¹³ Local historians, on the other hand, being closer to the details, can far easier choose social and cultural approaches in cross border studies.

By comparing and contrasting societies at a local level details become clearer, thus comparisons at a local level make the unique and the general in our local communities more visible. Further more, comparisons at a local history level are often also easier to relate to for an individual attempting to understand another society. Burial traditions or the impact of electricity in a local community is easier to comprehend than national comparisons dealing with figures such as a country's gross domestic production (GDP) or inter-governmental issues such as diplomatic negotiations and tactics, both of which are examples of issues which most people find distant from their own, everyday lives.

It is, however, important to note that comparisons should be made on equal grounds. One community should not be held as the norm or ideal, this will only lead to a bias narrative. Instead one should view "both sides of the comparison as "deviations" when seen through the expectations of the other."¹⁴

¹³ O'Brian, P. "The status and Future of Universal history", in Sogner, S: *Making Sense of Global History*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 2001, p. 28.

¹⁴ Pomeranz, K: *The Great Divergence, China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2000, p. 8

For the more “professional” historian, international comparisons of local communities can be used to test explanations and theories.¹⁵ To test explanations, we can take a step further than the simple comparisons, and find “other positive explanatory factors for the phenomenon”. Kjeldstadli identifies two ways in which this can be done. One, “maximum similarity”, is to find cases which are similar in all but one factor. The latter then becomes the explanatory factor. The other, “maximal difference”, is when the chosen cases only have one similar, deciding factor. An example can be comparing the impact of the first medical doctor in an Italian and a Kenyan village. International local history studies can also be used to “test” theories. By comparing different objects and factors in parallel local history examples, we can demonstrate a theory’s explanatory power. Based on numerous local history studies we may also be able to aggregate trends and sometimes create new theories.

An international perspective, a modern narrative

- Globalisation
- Young people have the global culture as an integrated part of their lives and identity

An international perspective, a modern narrative

Today globalisation is tying local communities across the world closer together through such things as internet, travel and common culture, especially youth culture such as film and music. Local communities and frameworks are changing due to the global trends, and local historians are needed to place these changes and implications in a historical context and perspective. Local history with an international or global approach can thus be said to be a modern and contemporary way of teaching and studying history.

Furthermore, young people today have the global culture as an integrated part of their lives and identity. Many have travelled to distant places and cultures, and most are curious about “other” places. The evening news often tells more about what is happening abroad, than what happens at home. In the words of the economic and global historian, Patrick O’Brian, young

¹⁵ Kjeldstadli, K.: ”Komparasjon og byhistorie”, in *Heimen 1:92*, s. 27

people are therefore less “tempted to feed on diets of national, let alone parochial histories”¹⁶. Therefore, drawing international parallels in local history and placing local communities in an international context will be a narrative more suited to how today’s young people perceives the world.

Local history; the most practical level for international history studies?

Local history; the most practical level for international history studies?

The contact between local communities has changed over time. In the past, contact was often occurred at an individual level, e.g. between individual traders. Today, contacts are increasingly institutionalised. Villages and towns have foreign “friendship communities”, and regions have entered into strategic alliances in order to forward them selves in global, political and economic life. An example of this is the North Sea area alliance, consisting of the regions Jæren in Norway, Northern Scotland and parts of the Netherlands, the Benelux countries are another example. The relationships are maintained by institutionalised networks, both on the local community level, and on more aggregated levels, such as the European Union’s support of European regions.

Local communities have always been exposed to international influences in some degree or other; therefore an international perspective should be an integrated part of local history studies. It is to facilitate the international perspectives and consciousness in local history issues that we have established LHWW. Our aim is to make LHWW a resource and network for people involved in local history activities such as local history research, organizations, genealogy and cultural heritage projects, as well as libraries. LHWW will be a doorway for those who wish to explore and include international perspectives in this work.

The country introductions make it possible not only to learn more about local history in other places, but also to come in contact with local historians and organisations outside ones own

¹⁶ O’Brian,P. ”The status and Future of Universal history”, in Sogner, S: *Making Sense of Global History*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 2001, s. 23.

country and inspire to comparisons and discussions about differences and similarities which I have just now indicated. Thus, LHWW makes it possible for genealogists to access sources outside their national borders, local history groups to meet and perhaps make joint-publications or cultural heritage groups to exchange best practice experiences.

During 2004/2005 NLI plans to publish presentations of local history in different countries on the "Local History World Wide" pages. Presently we have presentations from Sweden, Norway, Flanders (Belgium), Hungary and the US, and we are expecting from Russia, Iceland, Ukraine, and the UK. The primary language is English; however, we hope to have the presentations available in other world languages as well. LHWW is actively seeking cooperation with local history communities around the world in order to collect information and presentations.

I will now give a short guided tour of the LHWW pages. You can also find your own way by going to: <http://www.localhistory.no/>

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