

BOOK HISTORY'S RECENT METHODOLOGICAL TREND: NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL OUTLINES

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National and International Book History

Recent overviews and commentaries on the development of the book history discipline constantly remark the great successes of national book history projects. Several national book history projects have either already finished or are still on the way. The most famous of these efforts is probably the French huge five volume series *l'Histoire de l'édition française* published in 1980s, but similar overviews are in work for example in Germany, Scotland, Canada and Australia. In smaller scale, both Finland and Lithuania have seen the release of national book histories. These sorts of projects and publications have certainly given comprehensive and important overviews and insights; all in all, they have offered a necessary stage while contributing to and developing not only book history but also plain history studies and research.

Although there are no hesitations to hail these publications' importance, the choice to write national histories is nowadays contested. Swedish book historian Eva Hemmungs-Wirtén remarks how national projects form a common but unnecessary understanding of appropriate frames, or a narration, for a proper book history. They compile a certain common and limited understanding of the discipline. At worst they end up supporting the kind of representation or model they are supposed to study critically in the first place [6].

On the other hand, American book historian Robert Darnton stated already in early 1980s in his seminal article on book history, that printed works do not have frontiers; they have no respect on linguistic, political or any other limits [3, 21]. Darnton's remark has not been left alone, as recently not only book history but also other history disciplines have encountered efforts to create and conceptualise new research aims and approaches for a modern *inter- or transnational history*. As the triumphs of national book history projects still go on, the book history discipline seems to get ready for new and refreshing approaches. Recently various conference panels, articles and other publications have discussed on topics and methodological issues which break the national limits. The

international book history association *Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing* (SHARP) gives probably the best example, as its latest conferences and newsletters have included an ongoing discussion on how to practice and support *international book history* [4]. For example the research done on the history of book trade has already touched upon international features [9, 26–27].

Reasons for supporting such new methodological approaches and research aims are quite clear. Our contemporary societies' development shows us how an examination based on national borders does not offer a full understanding of the human societies. Individuals and societies also need these examinations to fully understand their traditions as well as contemporary world. In European level, the re-configuration of the international connections and perceptions after early 1990s, and also the supposed shrinking of nation-states' importance because of globalisation, do create new needs and interests towards these directions.

However, there is a clear juxtaposition between the new inter- or transnational approaches and the more traditional methodology or demarcations attached to the national projects.

What will this kind of change from national to international research alter? Does the call for internationalism create a new methodological approach or even a paradigm for the discipline?

In the first place, what comes to the principal description of the book history, I would say no. As is well known, book history is not a research field determined by a certain methodological aspect but by its study target, the book and the individuals and societies that either influence on printed works form and contents or that are influenced by printed works. To reveal different aspects of the history of books and the people related to them, book historians have to be multidisciplinary in the first place. Is the framework of our studies national or international, we anyway choose to study books' political, social, cultural, economic etc. history by using bibliographical methods, literary criticism, cultural theory, microhistory, quantitative analysis etc. In this sense, internationalism does not change anything.

Instead, it rather offers new insights and possibilities to the older or traditional ways to study and write book history. In my view, to practise *international book history* is based on an attitude that acknowledges the necessity to find further approaches for a historical study than just the national model. The effort calls for describing further frameworks or narratives, which are relevant and appropriate for understanding human societies' histories. In this way international book history does offer a new field of opportunities. However, at the same time researchers seem somewhat confused about these new approaches and demands. To find a coherent understanding about what is the new international book history is difficult, because commonly defined vocabulary and methodology, or at least discussion on them, is somewhat lacking. I aim here to

present shortly three themes which one comes across while proceeding further with international book history and which may help in determining this new field of study.

Concepts Need Partition and Definition

To juxtapose *national* and *international* research projects creates an unnecessary two-dimensional simplification. It limits our methodological choices but simultaneously avoids the exact conceptualisation of the key concepts. One should first of all think, what are the preferable meanings of the two terms, and are there other related terms that could be used in a purposeful and productive way.

In the first place, the dichotomy is based on two varying view on meaningful spaces or spatial dimensions. National and international studies use borders, where the studied historical theme is supposed to take place, usually determined rather loosely with linguistic or state borders. In recent studies the key effort has been on fuller understanding and distinguishing the similarities of the overlapping geographical, national and social or cultural spatial spheres [12]. What comes to the earlier nationally minded studies, to tie state-territory with socio-cultural aspects' of the society has been pivotal. Following this, further notions can be targeted to our understanding on what is "national". The term should – or at least could – be separated from a certain nation-state regional entity. Benedict Anderson has fruitfully argued, that nationalism as an ideology is rather an ideological view or cultural model, commonly perceived worldview that links individuals together although they might never physically have met [1]. The ideology itself has very little to do with geographical dimensions and does not demand that the limits of commonly agreed national ideology and state boundaries are the same.

Nationalism and nation-states are historical phenomena that, although in the modern world we see them as central units, were a nineteenth century invention. National conceptualisation continues to have strong links to the ideological model that has supported development of the nation-states and unified national cultural environments in them. Therefore these concepts include a danger of anachronistic and simplifying approaches. One could ask, what is the difference between *domestic* and *national* and how does it clarify the issues if we separate these two concepts from each other? Although the national culture may be described in certain places and periods as the main cultural outline or phenomena, domestic phenomena avoids the danger of nationalist understanding and suggests that there are other opinions, phenomena or ideologies that might bind a society or even a state together. Then we can begin to wonder, what is the difference between "a Finnish book store" and "a book store in Finland" and why these two themes have been mixed up so often.

Although this kind of an approach creates a fuller view on nationalism or nation-states, even in last two hundred years they have not been the only determinant of the human societies. Societies have always been forced to overcome these limitations or created complex multicultural or -dimensional societies in the state area. There begins the work of international research approaches. However, the concept “international” can be – and have been – used quite carelessly and in obscure ways. It might refer to all possible connections, transfers, interactions and entanglements over state borders and hence creating “international” phenomena. Likewise the term quite usually includes also topics related to local but nevertheless, multicultural societies. The subjects of the concept become soon too diversified, but simultaneously there are other concepts like *transnational*, *multinational* or *supranational*. They could be used for their own specific themes and to restrict the *international* to a clearer definition.

In fact, the concept “international” remains strongly attached to the nation-states and “national histories” it claims to replace but in fact, continues to keep in the core of the study. As the term refers to national spheres, it does not succeed to escape them as a pivotal object of a study. Simultaneously it also simplifies the study object. If states are the one and coherent object or unit of international studies, societies and states might simplistically appear and be treated as one entity [7 and 11 and 12]. This is why certain historians have suggested that the concept “international” should be saved for a quite narrowly limited use: the nation’s or states’ relations with each other. “International studies” should concentrate only on describing connections and influences on state machinery level: the history of states’ foreign affairs, history of diplomacy etc. [7 and 12].

This narrower definition creates a need to use other concepts for further phenomena. In many cases book historians’ dearest topics seem to have been rather part of a transnational history’ Transnational studies break the presupposed liaisons between state machinery and societies and avoid giving a primal position to national entities. It stresses societies’ multidimensionality and society’s, culture’s etc. independence from the state-system. *Transnationalism* has become a central concept for describing interactions and entanglements between non-governmental individuals and entities like cultural societies and business connections. In its diversity it is about to oust “international history” as a central concept for describing approaches that seek to understand societies’ interactions and entanglements over the state borders. Furthermore, there are still other terms; one should remember that some phenomena might best be described

Recently established project *Geschichte-transnational – histoire.transnational* offers an excellent webpage for discussing about and further development of the transnational history. It includes for example a discussion forum with some key texts on the nature of the transnational methodology, see <<http://geschichte-transnational.clio-online.nct/transnat.asp>>.

multinationalist or *supranationalist* (like European Union's political position over the member states) [12].

In the end, the two key concepts' narrowed meanings do not create anymore the original two-sided composition. Instead, they become analytical and offer room for other well defined concepts. The concepts do not concentrate that much on defining space but on the nature of human societies' networks and interactions. Societies' coherence in certain areas of life might still be described with terms related to geographical or spatial aspects, and therefore they are nevertheless an important part of historical studies. More exact precisions for historical issues could be reached with other related and in the first sight, simple terms like *local* and *regional*, along with the related *sub-* or *mesoregions* [15]. Although this kind of conceptualisation might appear rather simple, it gives clarity to historians especially when exploring unfamiliar societies or presenting results.

Other Definitions for Research

Secondly, if as said, the starting point of the international book history would be the printed works' supposed existence without frontiers, one wonders why to concentrate only on societies' efforts to overcome the geographic or state borders. Should we specify our research themes also or rather with other frameworks or determinants than just the spatial ones?

There are various other borders, interesting frameworks for a study, than the traditional national or geographic approaches. A book historian might concentrate also on aspects that overcome such limitations like economic, social or gender ones – and they might turn out to be much more stricter borders than any state would arrange. But as Darnton hints, all these limits are not permanent. They are rather researchers' analytical tools than existing obstacles.

Such ways to determine one's study is not unfamiliar and as such do not leave national histories behind. However, when insisting to stress inter- or transnational approaches, I believe that by following this kind of study projects one is bound to go towards international approach, freeing one from immediate spatial determinations.

Diverse Research Traditions

If the two suggestions so far have merely tried to frame further research possibilities via conceptualisation, the last remark concentrates on what kind of new methods for international history has appeared and how diverse aims and results these studies might create. Recent articles on history studies' methodology create a picture of a three-stage development from comparison to transfer to entangled history.

Comparative history is already a traditional method to cover and examine similarities and particularities of diverse societies. Marc Bloch, the founder of the Annalist school, is usually regarded as the founder of modern comparative studies and methodology in history studies [2]. His invention was to compare structures rather than states or regions, and to locate the analytical categories according to the studied structure. This gave better possibilities to study societies' individual characters and developments. The German historian Jürgen Kocka has listed significant positive features of comparative studies: they offer better defined or otherwise neglected questions, the researcher might distance him/herself from his topic and therefore get a better chance of objectivity and the results include clearer options of causality and profiling of single cases [8 and 13]. However, the hindrances to write a comparative study are great and demanding. Researchers need to familiarise oneself with many themes and to dubiously depend on secondary literature. These problems have not discouraged researcher, rather there are new efforts to sharpen the comparative methods by avoiding nation-states as units for comparison and accepting the relational basis of the study objects [14].

Nevertheless, comparative methods offer only one approach to transnational history. While the practice of inarguably difficult and somewhat rare comparative methods should be practised, recent views on practising transnational history stresses comparative methods' negatively artificial division of societies. However, societies are not clear entities existing without connections and influences between each other, and therefore cannot be examined or revealed by using only comparative methods. Furthermore comparative studies are still limited to national frameworks where states were the basic unit for research, although that judgement does not anymore hit the target just as badly as before [5 and 16]. Comparative studies have learned to use other relevant entities and to distinguish the necessary similarities for making comparison fruitful.

Nevertheless, the examination of cultural (and other) transfers and influences has become an important research field. Usually this has begun with *transfer studies* describing influences that have moved from host to recipient or from centre to periphery. Besides that, Michel Espagne emphasised early the need to study both sides of the transfer as one entity. His results showed that transfers were not just unchangeable influences carried from one place to another, but both recipients and receivers would change and mould the transferred object suitable for and included in local surroundings [5 and 13].

These earlier ideas for studying influences and transfers over state borders have lately evolved to further methodological approaches, to so called *entangled history*, *histoire croisée* or *Verflechtungsgeschichte* and *Beziehungsgeschichte* [16]. The idea of "crossing" includes various viewpoints, but what comes to determining the study object, it underlines the complexity and mutuality of connections and transfers between societies. A great emphasis is given to assess international influences and transfers, and

to account for the processes of integration and its impacts on the development of regions, continents or civilizations. A history of certain international region is not anymore understood to consist of collecting together various national histories, but linking these diverse histories together and researching how do their influences to each other build a common and mutual history. The relations work in both directions and they are multidimensional, which means that the emphasis is on interaction, adaptation and mutual dependencies instead of diffusion and influence. This kind of transnational and entangled history claims to truly offer new tools for the modern societies' identity building. In that way it stands as a choice for the national histories, which nevertheless, are continuously included in the true global history and identity building [10].

Critics over the methodological borders might be harsh sometimes. However, to me it seems that all approaches are necessary, because they reveal different aspects of societies. Therefore, a historian must know each approaches' strengths but also shortcomings, and for a fuller view, be prepared to use them all according to his/her own will and aims.

No Definite Conclusions or Answers

What is called an "international book history" in fact includes many facets and approaches. In book history's case the theme seems to present a certain overall but obscure concept, which is mainly used for promoting new possibilities and projects, not yet for determining research methodology and aims. Although I have tried to avoid the overall concept of "international book history", I use it now for the conclusion while lacking any better concept.

To support and make international book history means various things that should be accepted, scrutinised, and used. In that way it is just a continuation of the fact presented earlier, that book history as such does not limit itself to one tradition but includes various methodologies and approaches. But this kind of overall approach fades the complexity of the topic. If we concentrate only on "national – international" aspects, we simplify our methodological approach significantly and lose certain possibilities. Therefore historians are already proceeding further in conceptualising their efforts and seeking for new ways to study and describe human societies' pasts. At the moment, one key aspect for succeeding in further studies and international co-operation is the need to determine our efforts better, both conceptually and methodologically. What kind of phenomena we want to study? What is the nature, the aim or our understanding of a reasonable result of the "international" methods or aspects that we create and use?

Although a clear-cut conceptualisation agreed by every book historian is a utopia, to acknowledge the problems and further efforts to solve them are necessary. This becomes clear as one faces the fact that in many cases writing international history

demands an international research team or is targeted to an international audience. In such cases researchers have to agree on certain methodological and conceptual principles. Otherwise, they risk creating individual examinations, which are incommensurable and unable to reveal comparisons, interactions and entanglements. Already Robert Darnton made a similar statement, as he described the aims of the discipline and the essential needs that book historians must fulfil to understand each other and co-operate [3, 21]. That statement remains significant.

The effort to study book histories' international dimensions serves not only its original aim but also clarifies the counterpart, the national book history. Through comparing the different layers of social and cultural societies and networks we find not only what is international but also what is national, and end up stressing not only the international transfers and connections, but also the local relevancies and uniqueness.

The effort to support *internationalism* among book historians has so far surfaced mainly among larger cultural areas, where the dominant native culture has formed an entity worth of studying on its own. As the historians of these areas turn to new dimensions and offer new insights to the topic, researchers studying societies and areas traditionally multicultural or multilingual, like at the Baltic Sea Region, might somewhat wonder, what is actually new here. There are and have been many various societies and communities, where individuals have to take it as self-evident, that their histories are not only national or even domestic, but always include traits from and connections to outer world. Also nowadays historians live and work in societies, which use multiple languages, but at the same time have their own distinct features unfamiliar to others. As the book history has nowadays a foothold all over the Baltic Sea Region, I would believe that we are quite readily armed to the necessity of co-operative research projects and "international book history". These kinds of projects and examinations could end up having a lot to offer for a larger international audience interested in multicultural societies and histories and how to study them.

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Abstract

About twenty years ago Robert Darnton famously wrote how books know no frontiers. Nevertheless, as the discipline of book history has established itself around the world, many comprehensive works on the research field have determined themselves according the nation-state borders. As the national needs have been recently fulfilled in many countries, the international and cosmopolitan themes and studies have received a new kind of support. In the world labelled by globalisation such a change of attitude seems to be reasonable.

Those book historians who hear the call have to determine their research work again and find new interesting frameworks for their studies. What can they find? What possibilities these new choices give? The international approaches may offer new insights about the past, but do they also

offer better chances to reach project funding and contemporary readers? Researchers in smaller countries, where local book culture has been more or less dependent on foreign contacts and influences for a long time, can ask if the cosmopolitan attitude has in fact ever been forgotten: a new methodological turn stressing transnationalism and diversity might be worthless when looking for example from Baltic Sea Region where languages, cultural and trade networks, social systems and even states have continuously changed. In the end the contemporary book history researchers do not have to answer only if they want to follow new methodological suggestions, but on what do we want to seek when we examine history.

The presentation discusses three topics related to the recent methodological trend that seeks to leave nation-states behind as the main object or framework of book history studies. In the first place the juxtaposition between national and international approaches is dismantled. In addition other concepts like "local", "regional", "domestic", and "transnational" and "multinational" are conceptualised and compared to each other. Secondly researchers should seek for other defining frameworks: studies concentrating on linguistic, social or gender borders instead of national approach would offer further insights. Finally specific methodologies have been created for international history studies; comparative studies, studies on cultural transfer and entangled histories all reveal different aspects of examined societies and individuals. They all belong to historians' working tools.

NAUJAUSIOS KNYGOS ISTORIJS METODOLOGINĖS TENDENCIJOS: NACIONALINĖS IR TARPTAUTINĖS APYBRAIŽOS

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Santrauka

Robertas Darntonas prieš dvidešimt metų rašė, kad knygos nepripažįsta ribų. Tačiau knygos istorijos plėtra pasaulyje rodo, kad daugelio išsamių šios srities mokslo veikalų turinį lėmė nacionalinių valstybių sienos. Daugelio šalių nacionaliniai poreikiai jau buvo patenkinti, taigi daugiau dėmesio imta skirti tarptautinėms ir kosmopolitinėms temoms. Globalizacijos sąlygomis pasaulyje tokia permaina atrodo dėsninga.

Globalizacijai paklustantys knygos istorikai turi iš naujo apibrėžti savo mokslinius tyrimus, rasti naujų įdomių studijų objektų. Tarptautinės temos leidžia naujai pažvelgti į istoriją, bet ar jos teikia daugiau galimybių gauti geresnį finansavimą ir patraukti šiuolaikinius skaitytojus? Mažesnių šalių, kurių vietinė knygos kultūra ilgą laiką priklausė nuo ryšių su užsieniu, tyrinėtojai teigtų, kad kosmopolitinis požiūris niekada nebuvo pamirštas. Todėl naujas metodologijos posūkis transnacionalizmo ir įvairovės link yra beprasmiškas tyrinėjant, pavyzdžiui, Baltijos regioną, kuriame kalbos, kultūros, prekybos tinklai, socialinės santvarkos ir netgi valstybės nuolat keitėsi. Galų gale šiuolaikiniai knygos istorikai turi ne tik žinoti, ar nori naudoti naują metodologiją, bet ir ko ieškoti tyrinėjant istoriją.

Straipsnyje aptariamos trys temos, susijusios su metodologine tendencija atsisakyti nacionalinių valstybių kaip svarbiausio knygos istorijos studijų objekto ir pagrindo. Pirmiausia paminama nacionalinio ir tarptautinio požiūrio prieštara. Be to, aptariamos ir lyginamos kitos koncepcijos („victos“, „namų“, „regioninė“, „transnacionalinė“ ir „daugiatautė“). Toliau vietoje nacionalinio požiūrio mokslininkams siūloma ieškoti tinkamesnio tyrimų pagrindo. Kalbinių, socialinių ar lyčių pagrindu atlikti tyrimai gali pateikti naujų įžvalgų. Tarptautiniams istorijos tyrimams naudojami sukurti saviti metodai (lyginamieji, kultūros perdavimo ar susipynusių istorijų), kurie atskleidžia skirtingus tyrinėjamų visuomenių ar individų aspektus. Visi jie yra istorikų darbo įrankis.