

About the CCC

1. Introduction (research topics, short history)

The research group

Communities Comparisons Connections (CCC) is a young research group founded in 2008. The group brings together historians and social scientists who study historical processes in a comparative and global perspective through the scope of diverging spatial, social, religious, and political geographies. Our focus on *Communities, Comparisons and Connections* applies to a variety of research topics: case studies and regional studies in a comparative perspective; broader societal shifts with global ramifications; and various models of explanation for social change on a global and *longue-durée* scale. We pay attention to different units of analysis (social groups, societies, states, civilisations, networks, systems, etc.) and to a diverging set of research strategies (comparative analysis, system analysis, network analysis, etc.).

CCC is organized as a *cross-departmental research group* and an interdisciplinary group of scholars. Currently CCC has 25 active members (7 ZAP and 18 pre- and post-doctoral researchers). About 35 scholars from 6 departments and 3 faculties are invited to the monthly CCC meetings. 17 members are from the History Department: 3 ZAP (2 FTE: Lecoq 100%, Vanhaute 66%, Limberger 33%), 3 part-time ZAP (François 5%, Smis 5%, Van Minnen 5%), 2 post-docs (Caestecker, Feys) and 9 PhD-students. The research integrates a broad range of thematic, temporal and regional foci, from the Middle East, via Africa and Asia, to Europe and the Americas. Its main goal is to promote historical research with a comparative, non-Eurocentric, global and transdisciplinary perspective. The CCC is centered in the History Department (where the secretarial duties are concentrated) and provides an interdepartmental and interfaculty platform for historians and other scholars with a predominantly world historical research interest. This includes scholars from the Humanities and Philosophy Faculty (Departments of History, North African and Middle Eastern Studies, Far Eastern Studies, Indology) and the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. More information on members, research, activities, education and publications can be found on: <http://www.ccc.ugent.be>.

Research focus and strategy of the research group

In its most basic definition, world or global history studies the beginnings, growth and changes in human communities from a comparative, interconnected and systemic perspective. Central concepts are communities, comparisons, connections and systems. It is not about the world as such; it is about human societies that have shaped this world. These communities or societies are studied in three ways: 1) from a comparative perspective to detect patterns, similarities and differences, 2) via their interactions, connections, circulations and conflicts, and 3) within the context of (large-scale) systems that condition human actions and historical development. We understand this threefold trajectory as a unity, or better, a trinity. This research strategy addresses three sets of basic questions in world history. Firstly, how do human groups and organisations try to attain similar goals within different contexts and with different means (reproduction of the physical self, of their labor and knowledge, of their social and cultural patterns, of their societal organisation)? Which factors, internal or external, define different or divergent outcomes? Secondly, how do human groups and organisations reconfigure their societal systems in the wake of contacts, interactions or conflicts with other groups? Does this cause fragmentation, reconstruction, or expansion of societal systems? Thirdly, how does this preconfigure overarching systems of rule and exchange? Does growing interaction cause more convergence or does it trigger new divergence trends?

The objective of CCC is to question and shape the practice of 'new' global or world history by building upon existing approaches and testing new ones. This is a collective endeavor based on exchanging

analytical views and visions on existing and new work. The name of the research group reflects its research interest as well as its approach to scholarly collaboration. Over the past decades, coinciding with the expansion of academia, history has become a fragmented field dominated by highly specialized studies (in the form of articles and monographs) that explore specific questions in depth. Some deplore this atomisation, and global history or world history partially results from a desire to go beyond this fragmentation and reconnect the ever-smaller parts of the historical puzzle into a more coherent picture. This reconnection is an ongoing process, which means that most, if not all, prospective and active world historians come from a very specific background. This is also true of the CCC. The group reflects a wide variety of research topics, places and periods. All the researchers share a common goal: they explicitly want to question 'space' and they want to compare their own research field and findings to that of others in order to broaden their own view on their work within a world history framework. The internal connections within the group are made through comparing and connecting one's communities (or research fields). This is not an easy task when 'communities' range from spatially small localities in the 20th century Andes and Yangtze Delta, via the 15th century Mamluk polities, to the 12th century Chinese trade empire in the Indian Ocean and anything in between. As a result, one of CCC's main challenges is to establish a common language in which it presents its findings to one another and to make these findings comprehensible, thereby enabling comparisons. During our monthly meetings, we discuss our current affairs, new work being carried out by our colleagues, and new developments in the field. We try to establish this language by common study and discussion of key texts and their historiography: 'the classics'. These include Braudel, Ibn Khaldûn, Wallerstein, and others. The collective reading and discussing of such texts helps provide insight into key interpretations made in various subfields of global history as represented in the group. A second positive feature of this process is the invitation of scholars from outside the group. The final, and most productive aim, is to present ongoing research in the form of articles or chapter drafts.

Since CCC is a newly founded research group, output in publications and doctoral dissertations is still modest. Over the last few years, we were able to initiate some new major research lines: 'Trajectories of peasant transformation in a comparative and global perspective, 1500-2000' (Vanhaute), the ERC project 'The 'Mamlukisation' of the Mamluk Sultanate. Political Traditions and State Formation in 15th century Egypt and Syria' (Van Steenberg), 'The Indian Ocean World: The Making of the First Global Economy in the Context of Human-Environment Interaction' (Schottenhammer), 'Alien policy and international migration in 19th and 20th century' (Caestecker and Feys), and the various African history projects (Lecocq). New proposals for research projects and collaboration are being discussed and submitted by the CCC and this will continue in the (near) future.

Roots of the research group

CCC is rooted in two research traditions of the former Department of Contemporary History. The first was embedded in the Ghent University Research Group World-Systems Analysis, established in 1993 by scholars from the History (Vanhaute), Philosophy, Geography and Political Sciences Departments. This interfaculty research group organized colloquia en workshops, inaugurated the Immanuel Wallerstein Chair (with renowned speakers such as Giovanni Arrighi, Peter Taylor, Etienne Balibar, Bart Tromp, József Böröcz, Patrick O'Brien, Peer Vries and Ha-Joon Chang), and coordinated the interfaculty course 'Introduction into World-Systems Analysis'. The group supervised over thirty master theses and several doctoral dissertations, participated in the public debate, while publishing their research results in national and international journals. Three research groups share the inheritance of the World-Systems Analysis Research Group: *Communities-Comparisons-Connections* (<http://www.ccc.ugent.be>), *Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry CEVI* (<http://www.cevi-globalethics.ugent.be>), and *Globalization and World Cities* (<http://geoweb.ugent.be/seg/research/globalization-and-world-cities>). The second tradition is a

research line focusing on contemporary African history, established by Luc François and Daniel Van Groeneweghe in the 1990s in the Contemporary History Department. This resulted in some PhD projects and numerous master theses. In 2008 history scholars from both traditions founded CCC.

Research groups within the Faculty of Humanities and Philosophy are generally bound to departments. From the start, CCC aimed to cross these departmental boundaries. First, new staff could be attracted to the Department of Contemporary History, focusing on contemporary African history (as part of a Ghent University policy to strengthen its African Studies Program) through a translocal approach. This meant a broadening of both the geographical and analytical scope of the group (Lecocq). Secondly, the group took the initiative to expand beyond the borders of its own department into the other history departments at Ghent University (until their merger in 2010, Ghent University had five history departments) and to include historians who were active outside the classical history departments (Limberger, then department of Modern History). Thirdly, CCC attracted scholars from other departments and faculties, interested in research outside the European frame and with a structural, long-term and comparative focus (Van Steenbergen: *The Mamluk Empire*; De Clercq: *Jaina mercantile communities of North-India*; Schottenhammer: *China and the Indian Ocean*, etc.). Fourthly, CCC includes scholars from other higher education institutions that will become part of Ghent University in 2013-2014 (Applied Linguistics and Government Studies; Caestecker).

2. Scientific and social relevance of the research

In this period of rapid globalisation, the social relevance of a world history approach is widely acknowledged. Every new societal development requires a new interpretation of the past to help understand the world we live in. Beginning in the United States, the worldwide spread of global history holds pace with the increasing awareness of globalisation, visible in the social consequences of political and economic integration, and in migration and intercultural and interreligious encounters. The main globalisation processes are reflected in historical scholarship. Growing market integration and regional inequalities over the last two decades have led to renewed interest in global economic history in general and new approaches to 'the great divergence' in particular. The perceived (true or not) demise of the nation-state has led to a focus on trans-national integration. An increasing mobility of individuals and new trends in worldwide migration patterns have led to an upsurge in migration studies. The rise of religious fundamentalism – Christian, Muslim and Hindu alike – has led to a revival of the history of religions, which gained special prominence in the post 9/11 world. Belgium and Ghent University also follow these trends. What is new is an increasing attempt to study these phenomena via an integrative approach. Although it has its precursors, the 'new' global or world history is only about two decades old in the US, less than a decade old in Western Europe, and even more recent elsewhere.

Global economic history, with a predominantly structural perspective, is probably the oldest and best-established world history approach. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis is one of the most influential analytical models. This school is well represented in the CCC and forms a firm basis from which world history has been developed within the CCC. One of the biggest challenges, however, will be to connect knowledge from different parts of the world, including insights from outside the global academic elites, in a more balanced framework. Now more than ever, the experience of global history must be placed within the experiences of a rapidly changing, ever more interconnected and ever more unequal world. Evaluating, deconstructing and reconstructing a new global history are essential tasks. Most of us will agree that 21st-century global history has to be a 'decentered' history. Much of the drive for a 'new' global history started with an aim to surpass or delegitimize the 'old' Eurocentric stories of the rise of a unified world. A central paradox in world history is that it tries to understand and deconstruct its roots, which are squarely in civilisation

history, modernisation theory and Eurocentrism. We must, however, avoid new south-centric or east-centric master narratives, and must not fall into the postmodern trap of ever-changing but equal 'truths' and 'universalities'. Decentering the human story does not imply a 'politically correct' flattening of experiences around the world, nor does it need to become a basket of 'alternative', anti-hegemonic local stories or area-studies. In order to avoid disintegration into a set of separate stories, global history needs to take up the debate about unifying metalevels of analysis.

That is why other world history approaches, such as Lauren Benton's institutional world history, John Meyers' world polity theory, David Harvey's economic geography and Frederick Cooper's 'colonialism in question', are being included in CCC research projects. The study of historical developments within disparate structural, social and spatial dimensions, such as economy and religion, nation-states and empires, international organisations and local communities, calls for an approach that is generally labeled translocal. This translocal approach, defined as the study of history departing from a combined set of multiform spatial, social, political and structural entities, is still being developed.

Of scientific and social relevance is the fact that the CCC research group truly departs from the premise that global history is both limited to the contemporary period and needs to be based in Northern Atlantic history. With large research projects on 15th century Mamluk Egypt and Syria, the Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean, the history of peasantries in Latin America, China and Central Africa, and a number of projects on African history, it can safely be stated that the main regional focus of CCC research is in the global south. On the other hand, migration history within the CCC and projects on knowledge management, trade and commodity chains, state formation and the decline of the rural worlds do cover the Northern Atlantic. It is also important to note that there is a fair balance between economic and political history – dominant strands of global history in other important centers of study – and religious and intellectual global history within the CCC approach to world history. International trade networks are central in the doctoral projects of Abbeles en Declercq. The history of religious globalisation is well represented via research on Islam (Lecocq, Vanwymeersch and Daoudi) and Hinduism (De Clercq). The projects on medicine development in colonial Belgian Congo (Mertens) and on trans-Atlantic innovation and knowledge management (Mercelandis) represent very recent trends toward a global history of science, technology and medicine. Finally, new research themes developed over the past few years, such as the study of visions on and representations of the 'West' and the 'non-West', are represented with a finalized PhD on the representation of ethnical identities in Ruanda (Vervust) and a research project on the Ottoman perception of the Habsburg Empire (Kaçar).

Following the African history research roots of the CCC, different scholars investigate the problem of colonialism and imperial state-formation, mostly centered on Central Africa (Mathys and De Roo). This research is not strictly colonial or imperial history. It actively questions how colonialism and empire influenced processes of economic, social, and political integration that are unfolding in other regions of the globe. The surge in African history within Ghent University is a relatively new development and not a heritage from Belgian's colonial past.

Another research line takes up the challenges of recent global migration history (see also the upcoming International Conference IMEHA2012 in Ghent, organized by CCC ; www.imeha2012.ugent.be). The CCC group (Caestecker and Feys) shares this ambition by comparing Continental, Atlantic and Pacific migration systems in a global perspective. This research focuses on migration policies and its connection to social and business networks steering migratory flows. By comparing various regions and looking at the global ramifications that connect migratory systems, the aim is to develop models of explanation for social change on a global and longue-durée scale.

A major scientific merit of CCC-based research is its case-based empirical approach to global history, grounded in substantive research, which urges scholars to employ original approaches to data and

methodology. The idea that global history wants to reconnect the smaller parts of the puzzle does not mean it denies the existence of these smaller parts nor their significance. World historian William McNeill's saying that global history is the art of knowing what to leave out is not the CCC approach. Rather, we find it the art of knowing what to include. Most research within the CCC combines classic archive work with more inventive forms of research, such as oral history and historical fieldwork. The research carried out by Cottyn, Yang and Yu on the peasant communities in the Andes, China and the Yangtze Delta, and by Mathys on the border between Rwanda and Congo are outstanding examples. Although historical fieldwork has a long tradition in African history, it is relatively new in South American and Chinese history.

3. SWOT analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

(a) Strengths

The main strength of the CCC is its pluriform interdisciplinary approach to world history, in its periodisation, regional diversity, analytical frameworks used and subjects treated. In this young research group and within such a recent discipline as world history, this pluriformity is an intellectual advantage that prevents the discipline from forming particular intellectual path dependencies and hence reconfiguring what already exists under a new name. Instead, world history has a chance to take on larger developments on a global scale, taking all human experiences and fields of activity into account. Other strengths of the group are derived from the interdepartmental and interdisciplinary structure of the group, more specifically its large academic network. CCC members are or have been affiliated to academic institutes in countries across five continents, where they regularly teach and lecture. This makes global history as practiced in the CCC a global practice in itself. These networks have led to various international research collaborations (among others Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, Institute of Social Economy and Culture at Peking University, Fernand Braudel Center in Binghamton, International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte in Vienna, the London School of Economics, World History Center of the University of Pittsburgh, Global and European Studies Institute of the University of Leipzig) and we expect that they will continue this in the future. The interdisciplinary character of the group leads to fruitful intellectual cross-fertilisations. Perhaps the most important of these is that CCC members, through their contacts with other sub fields, other regions and other periods, quickly depart from presumptions and presuppositions in their own research, which makes for dynamic and creative new insights.

(b) Weaknesses

The strengths of the CCC are directly connected to its weaknesses. The dispersal of its members over five departments and two faculties does not favor the institutionalisation of the group within the University. This is partly related to the fact that research groups lack a firm independent basis within the faculty structure. They are administratively submitted to departments, with only slight (but growing) recognition outside the University amongst funding agencies, such as the Flemish Science Foundation. It is therefore difficult to promote the approaches and insights of the group within wider circles of the University itself, which is contrary to the CCC's international prominence. Within the history curriculum, for example, there are only a few 'true' world history courses (including a general introductory course in the first bachelor year, a deepening course in global history in the third bachelor year, and specialized seminars in the master programme). The history curriculum in Ghent still reflects a 'classic' Eurocentric approach to teaching. Developing courses based on themes and subjects that cross established time periods and that compare different regions of the globe (let alone treating them as fully interconnected) is a difficult task. The new two-year master curriculum will create room for this.

A severe limitation lies in the small to non-existent margins to attract new staff (ZAP) within the domain of global history. It is, for example, deplorable that the Ghent History department has no full time Americanist. Currently, the Ghent history department offers one course in American history, taught by non-tenured staff with only a 10% position. Having other regional or disciplinary specialisations connected to world history, such as specialists in the history of the Pacific, Central Asia or the south Atlantic, is currently only a dream.

Furthermore, attracting funds for transdisciplinary research projects still proves difficult. Both university structures and research councils are largely embedded in a disciplinary framework. Global history projects also encourage more intense international collaboration, redirecting research proposals to the ever more competitive international level.

(c) Opportunities

World history is an expanding historical approach that is rapidly gaining popularity, primarily in popular media and by the publication of a number popular science books. Whatever professional world historians might think of success authors like Jared Diamond, we owe them recognition for spreading a world history approach to wider audiences. The popularity of non-European and world history among students is reflected in the growing demand of students for world history and other non-Eurocentric approaches. This has led to the introduction of a general introductory course on world history at the faculty level in 2004-2005 and to the creation of a full-time tenured position in African history in 2007.

The open intellectual agenda of CCC can challenge an ever-broader group of scholars working in a global perspective, ranging from geography, philosophy, archeology, non-European cultural studies to economic, political and sociological studies. The growth potential of CCC is considerable, as long as there is a commitment to critically reflect on the units of analysis and the scales of time and space. The structure of the CCC research group provides many opportunities to develop wider research collaboration between members. So far, this has led to the financing of some new research projects, such as 'trajectories of peasant transformation' and 'maritime migration networks', and to new international collaboration agreements (such as Peking University). In the near future, new proposals for collaborative research projects will be discussed and submitted. We aim to submit project proposals on a more international and European level.

On a more general level, CCC is an academic platform that questions existing boundaries in scientific research. It puts the longstanding quest for transdisciplinarity in social sciences back on the agenda. The emergence of modern world history is rooted in new research in a broad range of social, biological and physical sciences. In order to develop common paradigms and common tongues, we need to thoroughly engage with social theory. We need open discussions about theoretical frameworks and practical methodologies. Concepts such as global economy (globalisation), global community, global governance and global ethics have to be incorporated (critically). Only then can global history actively engage with 'emancipating' science, connecting human actions and creating social spaces for reflection, action, interaction or resistance through the idea of human contingency. Because world history tells us about the complexity of both the past and present worlds, it makes moral claims about today and tomorrow. Since differences and diversity are basic components of the human story, world history shows that understanding and handling differences is an important moral skill. Claims, interpretations and evaluations cannot be made solely based on our own, known world; they must reflect the complexity of human history. Global history debates historical and contemporary issues in a wide range of discussions (migration, globalisation, ecological threats, state power, identity etc.)

(d) Threats

The main threat to continuity within the CCC is, paradoxically enough, the globalisation of its members. The CCC's empirical approach, the focus on the global south, and the extensive international networks have a downside: the members are often abroad. This can hamper the continuity of dialogues carried out at our monthly meetings and the deepening of internal collaboration. Thus far, the CCC has been slow to adopt IT solutions that could support these dialogues and collaborations, such as Zotero online databases and Skype conferencing. In most cases, this could be a solution for absent members.

Furthermore, boundary-crossing research is in an uncertain position. A disciplinary demarcation of education and research often poses practical barriers to the development of a transdisciplinary scholarly community. Finally, on a broader level, global history has to promote a 'transnationalisation' of knowledge while also dealing with a sharp hierarchy in academic knowledge. This has become such a large part of our academic reality that it is usually not even seen as problematic. Unequal worlds of knowledge create an unequal exchange of insights, rooted in an unequal, Eurocentric global past. Every debate about the status and the future of global history cannot escape the fundamental question: How do our patterns of knowledge reflect the existing hierarchical systems of knowledge?

4. Future research activities, goals and strategy

The primary aim of CCC in the context of Ghent University in general and the History Department in particular is to strengthen non-Eurocentric, comparative and interconnected forms of historical analysis in research programs and the course curriculum. One way of reaching this goal is to develop new courses, to volunteer guest lecturers within existing courses, and to add global dimensions to the teaching of existing subjects. The new Research Master (120 ECTS; starting in 2014/2015) will allow for the redefinition of courses and the development of a truly global master program. This will contain two intensive research seminars, Global Studies and Global History, and African History. Students will choose extra courses taught at Ghent University* and have to take a substantial number of courses at other institutions. A collaboration agreement has been drawn up with the University of Leuven and we are in the process of negotiating structural partnerships with foreign universities (such as the Posthumus Research Master in The Netherlands, Utrecht University, the London School of Economics, University of Vienna, Peking University, Humboldt University Berlin). Foreign students will be able to follow the Ghent master in Global History and the majority of the courses will be taught in English. This enables us to build a genuine master trajectory in global and non-European history, and helps to create an international scholarly community. It should be noticed that the attempts to build a genuine global history program at Ghent University have recently been recognized by the international Erasmus Academic Network CLIOHWORLD, who awarded the *ClioWorld Quality Label* to the Ghent University Global History Program (June 2011; <http://www.cliohworld.net>).

A second goal is to turn the CCC discussions into collaborative scholarly articles and books. In the near future, the CCC should work on establishing a more coherent set of meetings, focusing on a specific theme, with specific lectures and collective readings. This could lead to a collective publication, for example a special journal issue, on a particular topic, region, or development in world historical perspective.

We will also sharpen our ambitions related to international research collaboration. We will further explore the possibilities of international research projects and work out concrete proposals for more ambitious international and European funding.

Finally, we aim to participate more intensively in contemporary debates about the 'future of our world', via a sustained academic input on the topics of migration (as already done in projects

coordinated by Frank Caestecker and Torsten Feys), food, famine and deruralisation (Vanhaute), trade and globalisation (Abbeloos), African social change (Lecocq, Mathys, De Roo), human rights (Smis) and technical knowledge (Merzelis, Mertens), amongst others.

* These courses will be taught by members of the history department: maritime history, history of the European expansion, American history, African history, global studies, contemporary economic and social history, and introduction into world-systems analysis. Numerous courses on non-European and global topics will be offered by colleagues from other departments and faculties.