



**REFLECTIONS ON THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL  
IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: INTERVIEW WITH  
PROFESSOR HANS BECK  
(UNIVERSITY OF MÜNSTER - GERMANY)**

Interview given to Dr. Juliana Figueira da Hora – Postdoc – University of São Paulo (USP).

Hans Beck is Professor and Chair of Ancient Greek History at the University of Münster, Germany. He is also an Adjunct Professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. His areas of expertise are: Archaic and Classical Greece, and Roman Republic. The renowned Professor works on projects that relate to the theme of localism in a connected world. In particular, he applies historiographical and critical thinking theories to the study of Antiquity, to decipher codes of cohesion in ancient Greece and Rome. In 2015, he received the Anneliese Maier Research Prize of the Humboldt Foundation, one of the world's leading awards in the Humanities and Social Sciences. In 2018 he was elected to the Royal Society of Canada, an organization of notable scientists and scholars of Canada. Click here for his latest book entitled *Localism and the Ancient Greek City-State* (Chicago, 2020): <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/L/bo51203532.html>

Dossier

1) *Questions about the so-called “globalization” in the Ancient World are increasingly gaining ground in current research discussions in the area. Why is this approach so important in ancient studies? When did the topic become relevant to your research?*

Globalization has not only changed our lives, it also altered, and continues to alter, our understanding of historical processes. Indeed, the tidal wave of



studies on connectivity and network exchanges in the ancient Mediterranean world has amounted to nothing but a true paradigm shift in Classical Studies. Albert László Barabási's<sup>1</sup> verdict that everything is connected to everything else, and that the connection matters, has fully arrived in our field. Along the way, scholars have established a potent theoretical framework that makes the tenets of globalization meaningful to the study of Greek and Roman antiquity. In both cases and, to be sure, under different premises, the exploration of socio-cultural and economic exchanges in the Mediterranean, grounded in the distinctiveness of time, place, and culture effected a knowledge advancement that is as extensive as it is exciting. Notions of regional interaction, the idea of federalism in particular, have always been the core of my research. When I moved to Canada in 2005, my personal perspective of the world changed dramatically. Accidentally, this was also the time when globalization research picked up speed, visibly so. I guess that my first encounters with the topic were thus inspired both by academic shifts and my personal experience.

2) *What is the main topic of discussion of your research program "Parochial Polis. Localism and the Ancient Greek State"? What is the importance of thinking localisms in the Mediterranean?*

It has become fashionable to study the modes of interconnectivity in the ancient Greek world. Recent interest in network theories, fueled by social media communication on the internet, adds much to this approach. The Parochial Polis turns to the flip side of hyper-connectivity. How did polis societies respond to the changes in the world around them? The local offers a critical, maybe imperative perspective on Greek history that works as a complement to the notion of connectivity and integration. Actually, I think it is one of the main characteristics of Greek culture that it oscillates between universal values and local manifestations of the same – for instance, in politics, material culture, and religion. Looking at the latter: local expressions of Greek religion have often been understood as idiosyncrasies or deviations from the universal paradigm. This is somewhat misguided, I think. The local horizon is not a detour from the general script, but rather the other way around: it is the general script. Greek culture is epichoric culture. We somewhat lost sight of this in conversations about far-flung networks and flashy expressions of connectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert László Barabási is a Romanian-born Hungarian American, physicist known for his work in network theory.



3) *What is the difference between global and local in the studies concerning Antiquity? How are these categories thought of as applicable concepts for the study of the Greek polis? What are the implications when thinking about Mediterranean networks and hyperconnections?*

Approaches to the history of premodern societies through the lens of global network science have become immensely influential. In the study of the ancient (Greek) Mediterranean, the notion of globalization has become a salient paradigm. Recent research has demonstrated how, from the Archaic Age, shifting horizons of engagement created a new kind of Hellenic convergence in the Mediterranean basin. In this approach, the Mediterranean figures both as an analytic unit of and backdrop for the investigation, which has given rise to the label *Mediterraneanization* – an awkward term, to be sure, but the emphasis on process rather than timeless *Mediterraneanism* is important. *Mediterraneanization* thinks through the obvious, i.e., that locally encoded, bounded cultures are never pristine but energized by connections near and far. Material evidence casts a spotlight on those connections and their resonance in everyday practices: for instance, in securing raw materials, developing crafts, trading objects, and the conspicuous consumption of imported goods. Drawing on advanced readings of materiality and its entanglement with human practice as it transpires from Cultural Theory, *Mediterraneanization* studies shed new light on how people in Graeco-Roman antiquity experienced the world, and how this experience was shaped by networking activities across the sea.

4) *How can we link the idea of “glocalism” with global vs. local and how can we apply these concepts to the case of Mediterranean poleis?*

Do keep in mind that local boundedness was an important part of the mix. Indeed, *Mediterraneanization* suggests that the interrelations between bounded cultures were so deeply entangled that this altered the conventional binary of local and global. Each end of the binary infiltrated the other, both were intertwined; and the relation was exposed to accelerated adaptation and change over time. This is how, and why, the word *glocal* has entered the debate, which has become so prominent in recent Humanities and Social Sciences research. According to the conventional cycle of cross-fertilization between the local and the global, globalization triggers an increasing sense of disconnect from the local, or *delocalization*. This fuels a new need of locality; beyond its casual meaning of having a location, the term denotes the long-standing patterns that emerge from the association with the local, including all expressions of local culture, knowledge production, and communal conviction, each one in



relation to the local horizon that inspires them. In its most immediate variant, this need of locality inspires the sentiment of localism, that is, a mindset that prioritizes the sum of these local expressions and experiences over alternative sources of meaning from outside the community. Localism, in turn, challenges the basic tenets of globalization. 'Glocal' indicates that the rotations in this cycle happen all at once, signaling a hybridization of the ways in which existing socio-cultural practices are recombined with new forms and in new practices.

5) *The so-called hyperconnectivity is in vogue in various debates and reflections within Humanities, Biological and Exact Sciences. What are the theoretical and / or conceptual implications when it comes to focusing on the local?*

I am beginning to lose track of ever-new conceptual approaches to globalization and the global in the ancient world. It is intriguing to see that the local receives next to no attention in those conversations. Usually considered as a confined place with limited meaning and relevance, its role is reduced to serve as a platform from globalization process to play out and translate into real life constellations. Beyond the traditional view that sees local as an attribute, one which we encounter in so many matter-of-fact manifestations, there is a vast array of implicit strategies that were reflective of and, in turn, inspired by the local world. Local, in this sense, is not only a signifier of content and cultural practice, but a foundational quantity. If we were to explore the local with the same rigor that is applied to the global, I suspect that our investigation would immerse itself quickly in a quest for this deep frame of the local and the normativity it lends to human agency. There have been scholarly advances in disciplines and fields that are largely segregated and often compartmentalized. An integrated approach towards a comprehensive sociology of the local has yet to come.

6) *Is it possible to research the Ancient World in an interdisciplinary way? How? In Brazil, we still have a resistance in dealing with high complexity issues (such as globalization) on an interdisciplinary scale. How do you observe these issues in European Universities as a whole?*

Yes, cross-disciplinarity is precisely what I had in mind here. The exploration of the local can only be fruitful if carried out in a decidedly interdisciplinary and international – or global, forgive me the pun – approach. For instance, advances in the conceptualization of space and place, effected by what has been greeted as the Spatial Turn, draws on a broad variety of



disciplines, including Archaeology, Sociology, and History. The same goes for research on neighborhoods and their role in the process of local stratification. What I found most exciting in my cross-disciplinary endeavour so far was my exchange with colleagues in Neuroscience. Cognitive Neuroscience has demonstrated how place cognition is subject to the firing of so-called grid or place cells in the brain area where memory and navigation are located. The Nobel Prize Winners of 2014, discovered so-called grid cells in the section of the brain that is concerned with place-orientation. They traced a pattern in the firing of these place cells as test animals move through place. The traces of the pattern resemble a near-perfect geometric form (a hexagonal lattice), which suggest an innate navigation matrix. Greeted by the Nobel Committee as the discovery of “an ‘inner GPS’ in the brain that makes it possible to orient ourselves in space,” the work of the research team is a landmark step in the decoding of spatial awareness. The discovery of the Brain GPS promises new insight in the cognition of local environments and the interaction between the neural code of place-experience and extrinsic stimuli. At this fruitful juncture of the Neurosciences and the Humanities, the local has become a sphere of intense fusion of neural codes and culture.

7) *Is it possible to think models of modernity in the social, political and cultural dynamics of Ancient societies? Could you tell us a little bit about the Global Antiquities Project (Yan P. Lin Center, McGill University<sup>2</sup>), what are its objectives, contributions and relevance to the new currents of thought in the world's major Academic Centers?*

Absolutely. I am certainly no modernist in the common sense of the word – modernity is no self-evident value, especially not for the historian who explores chronological depths of modernity. At the same time, we are all rooted in real life-constellations of the presence. It is no surprise that research on inactivity and active false-information of people in Antiquity is currently so prominent. Among the many developments in our global world is the growing need for a new type of cultural meaning. At many universities in North America, Western Civilization courses have already given way to offerings that apply a more multi-faceted approach to history, society and culture. Yet it is only gradually that we have come to realize that the current re-negotiation of concepts and contents also requires a new approach towards the cultural foundations of human society. At McGill, I was fortunate enough

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2 Comes out in December 2020, link: <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/classical-studies/ancient-history/rulers-and-ruled-ancient-greece-rome-and-china?format=HB>



to establish, together with a co-director and a vibrant board of colleagues and students, a research cluster that is responsive to this challenge. Global Antiquities is designed as an academic engine that helps us to pioneer through the junctures of cultural reflection today. While aiming at the production of new academic knowledge, our team also seeks to employ the knowledge of past cultures and make the scholarly dialogue between them relevant to the intellectual and moral reflections that accompany the forces of globalization. The objective is to understand the cultural foundations of the Mediterranean World ('the West') and China ('the East'). Not an easy task, but – if you are curious enough and also willing to move beyond the comfort zone of your own academic discipline – one of the most rewarding scholarly adventures for me so far. I am hopeful that the comparative knowledge fostered by our network makes a small contribution to the Herculean task of generating a new type of cultural meaning that works for global citizens.