

Global Intellectual History: Some Reflections on Recent Publications

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Like other branches of history, intellectual history has ‘gone global’ in recent years (although perhaps with a certain delay), and there has been an increase in published research on more ‘global’ subjects. Five years after the publication of the volume edited by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori¹ (which originated in a 2010 conference), and two years after the journal *Global Intellectual History* was launched, now is perhaps the moment to take stock. More specifically, it is perhaps the moment to reflect on the questions of how useful the label ‘global intellectual history’ is proving, and what, if anything, is specific about the field—which Martin Mulsow, introducing a special issue of *Global Intellectual History*, calls a ‘discipline in the making’.² Indeed, as Moyn and Sartori make clear, there is as yet no general agreement on what is meant by ‘global intellectual history’. This reflects the uncertainty surrounding global history more generally.

In his recent book, Sebastian Conrad defines global history as an approach that aims to ‘arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the interactions and connections that have made the modern world’. He offers a preliminary broad definition of this approach as ‘a form of historical analysis in which phenomena, events, and processes are placed in global contexts’. Nevertheless, Conrad sees disagreement on how to best achieve this.³ He distinguishes three camps among global

¹ SAMUEL MOYN and ANDREW SARTORI, eds, *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

² MARTIN MULSOW, “New Perspectives on Global Intellectual History”, *Global Intellectual History*, 2, 1 (2017): 1-2.

³ SEBASTIAN CONRAD, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016): 3-5.

historians: those who see global history as the history of everything; those who see it as the history of connections; those who see it as a history based on the concept of integration.

As far as global intellectual history is concerned, I do not think that we are anywhere nearer a consensus on what is meant by the label. Nor do I think we have approached a consensus about whether it implies a different methodology, or simply a different subject matter. Mulsow, in the 'Introduction' just mentioned, claims that global intellectual history provides innovative approaches to an old subject, as 'the extension of the perspective into the global creates new and unique problems that require imaginative solutions'. Moyn and Sartori's volume aims to showcase 'alternative models' of what global intellectual history might be, and does indeed show the diversity of what could be encompassed by this label. Interestingly, the volume contains a preponderance of contributions from scholars at universities in the US, and even in New York City (which may, of course, simply reflect the venue of the 2010 conference), and the subject is approached from the viewpoint of 'the North Atlantic Academy' (3). This is perhaps symptomatic, to the extent that, in some quarters, global intellectual history may be seen as an attempt to escape from the British tradition of the history of political thought that has concentrated on Western Europe, and on a particular tradition of early modern thinkers. As expressed by Sanjay Subrahmanyam in his article for the special issue of *Global Intellectual History*, this tradition has been perceived as a 'more limited and hidebound version, narrowly and artificially constrained in space' (31).

Instead, Moyn and Sartori's volume concentrates on the modern period. This corresponds to doubts among certain scholars as to how far a global approach is appropriate for early modern intellectual history. Yet, to a large extent, such doubts are linked to different views of what is meant by global intellectual history. The three main models identified by the editors in their very useful discussion in chapter 1, called 'Approaches to Global Intellectual History', are: 'the global as a meta-analytical category of the historian'; 'the global' as a property of the historian's subject-matter, and 'the global' as a subjective category used by the historical agents under study (5). Moyn and Sartori also propose examples of these somewhat overlapping approaches, several of which have a long history: for the first category, universal histories and comparative history, and for the second category, the study of networks and intermediaries, but also translation—all, in fact, increasingly studied by early modern historians. For the third category, the intellectual history of conceptions of the global implies a more critical stance in relation to the whole enterprise of global intellectual history. The main body of the volume provides examples of these 'alternative options' (which are not necessarily alternative), before a concluding section questions some of the options.

A welcome and courageous element of the book is its inclusion of sceptical concluding reflections by Frederick Cooper, in a chapter entitled ‘How Global Do We Want Our Intellectual History to Be?’. Cooper underscores the importance of widening the scope of intellectual history, but questions the value added by the adjective ‘global’; he explains his agreement or disagreement with different contributions, and emphasizes the importance of empires, and the limitations of the subject. He also thinks that the global approach should not necessarily be confined to contemporary history. I agree with this unease concerning the belief that early modern intellectual history cannot be global, in view of many examples to the contrary. In this connection it is interesting to note that in the special issue of the journal *Global Intellectual History*, Richard Whatmore and Knud Haakonssen argue that, instead of being confined to a purely Eurocentric or Western tradition, J. G. A. Pocock’s essential concerns have always been global; they define Pocock as a historian of migration, or rather of the transplantation of forms of ‘self-reflection upon human activity’ across space and time.⁴ Whatmore and Haakonssen also highlight lesser-known aspects of Pocock’s scholarly interest, such as the question of settler versus indigenous culture in the New Zealand context, or Chinese historiography and philosophy. Emphasizing that his study of historiography is situated against such backgrounds and comparisons, they place Pocock’s themes in wider geographical and temporal perspectives. Duncan Bell would presumably agree with this view of Pocock: in his article in the Moyn and Sartori volume, he points out, with reference to work by Pocock among others, that certain understandings of ‘the global’ are simply new wine in old bottles, due to a failure to adequately conceptualize ‘the global’.⁵

The chronological limitations imposed by most of the contributors to the Moyn and Sartori volume are perhaps linked to another problem: it seems to me that in asking what global intellectual history might be, the problematic term is not only ‘global’, but also ‘intellectual history’, in view of the diverging views of what the latter covers. In the last of the volume’s ‘Concluding Reflections’, Sudipta Kaviraj’s contribution, ‘Global Intellectual History. Meanings and Methods’, begins with a rather idiosyncratic definition of intellectual history. He distinguishes two types of scholarly practice: on the one hand, an attempt to understand how ‘large intellectual ideas or trends cause the events that make history’, and, on the other, the analysis of intellectual systems or processes themselves. The remarks by Kaviraj, however, admit a wider diversity of practices, and conclude that we need to regard intellectual history as an internally heterogeneous discipline.

⁴ RICHARD WHATMORE and KNUD HAAKONSEN, “Global Possibilities in Intellectual History: A Note on Practice”, *Global Intellectual History*, 2, 1 (2017): 18-29, see 22.

⁵ DUNCAN BELL, “Making and Taking Worlds”, in *Global Intellectual History*: 254-279; see 254-256.

I am also somewhat unclear as to what Sartori understands by intellectual history in his contribution;⁶ he develops ‘a history of political-economic abstractions’, and claims that ‘global intellectual history is what intellectual history becomes once it begins to grapple with the problematic of real abstraction’. It is not clear whether this comes down to a global history of concepts and how far he considers his approach to be applicable beyond the study of political-economic discourse. Moyn’s chapter, ‘On the Nonglobalization of Ideas’, questions Sartori’s approach with reference to the examples of the Haitian Revolution and the non-globalization of human rights after the Second World War. He underlines the importance of political spaces and the complexity of structures, in other words ‘situational appropriation’ rather than a logic of globalization. Yet Moyn also seems to be understanding ‘global intellectual history’ as a ‘global *conceptual* history’. This is also the case for Christopher L. Hill, who discusses ‘Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century’; Hill theorizes his subject from the example of the Meiji period in Japan, and the process of universalisation and abstraction of particular concepts (such as society or civilisation) by different types of mediators, which enable circulation in non-national terms.

Other contributors to the edited volume, however, start from a different understanding of intellectual history as well as of ‘global’. Vanessa Smith questions the emphasis placed on intellectual history as a study of texts. In ‘Joseph Banks’s Intermediaries. Rethinking Global Cultural Exchange’, she studies Banks’s career as a reconceptualization of the role of the cultural intermediary. She emphasizes in particular the importance of the role played by Banks’s Tahitian friend Tupai and how their relationship challenges our understanding of a globalised intellectual history. From a very different perspective, Duncan Bell, using the work of Nelson Goodman, proposes the study of ‘world making’, or how people symbolically construct worlds; his aim is to emphasize the *practice* as much as the result, as well as the construction of intellectual personae.

Despite some apparent similarities, no other contributors to the edited volume adopt this approach to understanding ‘the global’ as the category of the actors under study. Nonetheless, several question the model of conceptual history. Janaki Bakhle, in ‘Putting Global Intellectual History in its Place’, concentrates on the Indian anticolonial nationalist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in order to question the presupposition that tracking and analysing the itinerary of ideas around the world is the dominant mode for writing global intellectual history. In a particularly interesting example of what a global intellectual history might look like, Bakhle’s study emphasizes the complexity of a thinker such as Savarkar, and the diversity of hermeneutical frames

⁶ ANDREW SARTORI, “Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy”, in *Global Intellectual History*: 110-133.

in which he must be understood. In another chapter, Mamadou Diouf and Jinny Prais also present case studies, which concern twentieth-century black intellectuals' thinking about Africa.⁷ Despite rather strange notions of what constitute Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, Diouf and Prais show how certain intellectuals contested their political exclusion by locating Africa in world history. By contrast, in his chapter, 'Globalizing the Intellectual History of the Idea of the "Muslim World"', Cemil Aydin links power struggles in the colonial era to Ottoman and European attitudes in the Nineteenth Century, arguing that the globalisation of norms includes the agency and contributions of non-Western intellectuals. He is essentially arguing for a non-Eurocentric global intellectual history, in dialogue with the new international history.

Other contributions adopt a comparative history approach, with a different understanding of 'the global'. Siep Stuurman compares Herodotus, Sima Qian, and Ibn Khaldun, who discuss different nomadic peoples from different geographical areas, periods, and intellectual traditions.⁸ In 'Cosmopolitanism, Vernacularism, and Premodernity', Sheldon Pollock compares the Sanskrit language of cosmopolitan space in a particular literary domain with the political-cultural order of ancient Rome, as part of a comparative study of premodern cosmopolitanism and the emergence of a 'cosmopolitan vernacular'. These two chapters, which take a different approach to 'the global', are also part of the small contingent devoted to the premodern period.

Overall, the content of this volume may justify Cooper's scepticism about global intellectual history. In any case, it confirms the diversity that currently characterizes views of global intellectual history and the practice of intellectual history in general, and thus the vigour of this field. I do not know what value is added by the notion of 'global' (to quote Fred Cooper), despite the interest and stimulus of the analyses in this edited collection. One can also wonder whether, in fact, such an addition creates 'new and unique problems'. The attempt to develop a transnational and transcultural intellectual history, to look at questions of circulation and connectedness, and to explore different sources is very welcome and can only help to renew the field, but do we need to worry about how 'global' it really is? Do we need to conceptualize 'the global'? *Global Intellectual History* is interesting less for the contributors' attempts to theorise and define than for the diversity of approaches and subjects it contains, in particular the precise case studies. For this reason, it can only stimulate renewal of the practice of intellectual history. If, as Moyn and Sartori suggest at one point, we take 'the global' to mean 'simply the methodological concern with experimenting beyond

⁷ MAMADOU DIOUF and JINNY PRAIS, "Casting the Badge of Inferiority Beneath Black Peoples' Feet": Archiving and Reading the African Past, Present and Future in World History", in *Global Intellectual History*: 205-227.

⁸ SIEP STUURMAN, "Common Humanity and Cultural Difference on the Sedentary-Nomadic Frontier: Herodotus, Sima Qian, and Ibn Khaldun", in *Global Intellectual History*: 33-58.

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familiar geographical boundaries' (21), then global intellectual history is to be embraced with enthusiasm.