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Global thinking

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Intellectual history and global history have both experienced a welcome revival in recent years, but is there a way to reconcile these two (re)emerging trends? This collection of essays offers a stimulating guide for future research, as well as some salutary warnings about the limitations of a global approach.

Reviewed: Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013, 342 pp.

For the most part, intellectual history has been a rather Eurocentric affair. This is not to say that its most prestigious proponents have consistently sought to exclude colonised, indigenous or subaltern 'Others'. It is simply that the twin disciplines of history and philosophy – from which intellectual history emerged – overwhelmingly took shape within European and North American universities, and their object of attention naturally gravitated towards European thinkers. More fundamentally, this Eurocentrism has expressed itself in the very questions that intellectual historians have asked themselves: to look, for instance, at the origins of liberal imperialism or the genealogies of constitutional politics is automatically to focus the discussion on a cluster of European – or 'Western' – issues and challenges. The problem remains even when the geographical scope is expanded to encompass the non-West. An intellectual history of liberals in Asia, Africa and Latin America still takes liberalism as its conceptual and historical starting-point, and still rests on implicitly Eurocentric foundations[1].

Fortunately, intellectual history has not been immune to the sweeping changes that have taken place in Anglo-American historiography in the last twenty years. Foremost amongst these is a global turn that has seen 'world' and 'transnational' history receive increased interest from doctoral students, publishers, selection committees and research funding bodies. Even in French universities – which have been notoriously resistant to

[1] See for instance C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

postcolonial and transnational approaches, not to mention intellectual history in general – the call of the global has been felt with growing urgency. The question, then, is how should intellectual historians respond to this new global turn? What does it actually mean to do global intellectual history? Some preliminary answers can be found in this lively collection of essays, edited by Andrew Sartori and Samuel Moyn.

The inspiration for the book was a conference held in New York in 2010, which may explain why nine of the thirteen contributors work at Columbia or New York University. This, and the fact that none of the remaining contributors are based outside Europe or North America, does rather undermine the book's global orientation. Nevertheless, the eclectic range of perspectives goes a long way to rectifying this imbalance. The chapters travel across a vast historical canvas – from Ibn Khaldun to twenty-first century neo-liberalism – and offer a wealth of insights into how intellectual historians might globalise their horizons and broaden their methodology. Indeed, the strength (and sometimes weakness) of the book is that there is no specific methodological agenda. The editors seem more eager to celebrate imaginative global thinking than to construct a platform for future research. One of the benefits of this open approach is that the diversity of contributions does not seem to dilute the book's impact. On the contrary, it suggests a variety of ways in which intellectual history might adapt to or accommodate the global turn. Whether this will be enough to convince sceptics of the identity of global intellectual history as a discrete field remains to be seen. But, either way, this book is a significant attempt to make sense of an emerging range of scholarship, while injecting some much-needed global thinking into the history of ideas.

Concepts, cases and critiques

The book opens with a succinct and useful introduction by Moyn and Sartori, in which they lay out "a framework for debate". In their own words, the volume "is intended to showcase the available choices at a threshold moment in the possible formation of an intellectual history extending across geographical parameters far larger than usual" (4). On the face of it, then, the only criteria for 'globality' is geographical reach, although the editors go on to sketch some of the main conceptual issues around which global intellectual history revolves. In particular, they mention the elaboration of 'universal' histories, the role of intermediaries, translations and networks, and the question of 'modernity'. As one might expect, these are all vital issues and they run through many of the chapters. But it seems to me that there are in fact three rather different kinds of chapter in this book: conceptual reorientations, case studies and critical appraisals. The editors themselves do not group the chapters in this way but this tripartite classification corresponds clearly to the book's aims.

The first cluster of chapters can be described as conceptual reorientations. These include Siep Stuurman's fascinating essay on the conceptualisation of the sedentary-nomadic frontier in the writings of Herodotus, Sima Qian and Ibn Khaldun; Sheldon Pollock's discussion of the medieval and early-modern Sanskrit world; Sartori's application of the idea of political economy to the global circulation of ideas; and Duncan Bell's argument that global intellectual historians should focus their attention above all on 'world-making practices'. What unites these contributions is that they all attack the problem of global

intellectual history through one or more concept(s). Stuurman deploys the term ‘common humanity’; Pollock talks of a Sanskrit ‘cosmopolis’; Sartori insists on the importance of ‘capital’; and Bell tries to define the idea of ‘world-making’. By globalising these concepts, the authors offer new means of thinking about the role of ideas in history. In some ways, these are the most original contributions since they take the challenge of the global turn as a real opportunity to rethink the conceptual parameters of the discipline.

The second set of chapters focuses on case studies. Here we might mention Vanessa Smith’s analysis of the interaction between nineteenth-century botanist and explorer Joseph Banks, and one of his most privileged Tahitian interlocutors, Tupaia; Christopher L. Hill’s discussion of the translation of Western concepts (like ‘society’ and ‘civilisation’) into Japanese in the late nineteenth-century; Cemil Aydin’s chapter on the idea of a ‘Muslim world’; Mamadou Diouf and Jinny Prais’s examination of the ways in which early twentieth century African and African-American authors tried to restore the voice of black people to history; and Janaki Bakhle’s reading of the poetry of the Indian nationalist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. These chapters share a desire to explore empirically the potential for a global intellectual history. In practice, however, their scope is more limited. The underlying goal seems to be to show how non-Western voices reinterpreted, nuanced, resisted or interacted with a variety of hegemonic Western narratives. This is an important project in itself but it is not as obviously original as the first cluster of essays. Thus, while they offer a rich tapestry of examples – I especially enjoyed Hill’s illuminating exploration of meaning, language and translation – these case studies do not coalesce into a strong methodological agenda.

The final cluster of essays offers critical appraisals. Evidently, Frederick Cooper and Sudipta Kaviraj were called upon to write concluding remarks to the volume and they both raise pertinent questions about the scope and reach of global intellectual history. Likewise, Moyn’s suggestive chapter on the ‘nonglobalization’ of human rights after World War Two is a welcome reminder that not all global concepts actually end up being globalised. The editors are to be credited for allowing critical voices to round out the volume: Cooper and Kaviraj’s contributions occasionally read like an advance review for the book itself but they mostly steer clear of self-congratulation. The book, rightly I think, ends on a note of uncertainty.

Answering the challenge of the global

This uncertainty comes not simply from the dissenting voices; it also comes from a feeling that global intellectual history – in the way it is presented here – has not fully begun to answer the challenge of the global. Two problems are immediately apparent. The first is the reluctance on the part of many of the contributors to think beyond certain key structuring concepts of Western political thought such as ‘modernity’, ‘capitalism’ or ‘imperialism’. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with these concepts but surely one of the exciting aspects of global intellectual history is the possibility of elaborating genuinely new analytical frameworks? Tellingly, it is historians of the ancient, medieval and early-modern periods who are most willing to bend the rules: for example, Stuurman uses his intriguing notion of ‘common humanity’ to analyse common approaches to frontiers and otherness in the writings of three (otherwise unrelated) classical authors. One wonders how this notion of ‘common

humanity' might be applied to an intellectual history of human rights (Moyn) or the inferiority of black people (Diouf and Prais)? After all, 'humanity' is a global phenomenon, as well as a powerful organising concept.

Another fruitful but unexplored concept is the anthropological idea of "belonging". Here is another framework that has the potential to become a truly global concept for intellectual history. It is already one that runs implicitly through the majority of the chapters in the volume. We repeatedly encounter actors who are concerned about belonging in some form or another – whether that means to a community (Stuurman), a political movement (Bakhle), an empire (Smith), a religion (Aydin), a nation (Hill, Bakhle), or a race (Diouf and Prais). It would only be short step from these empirical case studies to a broader theoretical model built around the concept of belonging, which would not be temporally bounded to 'modernity' and could be applied to different contexts without imposing pre-existing Western models on non-Western actors. Crucially, any such model would also allow intelligent and sophisticated comparison of ideas across time and space.

The second problem that emerges over the course of this volume has to do with the persistence of a specific model of the intellectual. With the exception of Smith, who tries to disentangle the ideas of a Tahitian 'intermediary', all the other contributions deal with intellectuals in the classic European sense. The overwhelming focus is on ideas as they are transmitted through elite actors who have an exceptional mastery of the written word. Given the capacious aims of global intellectual history, this seems incongruous. The editors' laudable aim of widening the geographical scope of intellectual history needs to be accompanied by a concomitant effort to deepen its sociological reach and bring in new actors. To take but one example, anyone who chooses to write a global intellectual history of the 'world-making' ideology of neo-liberalism – to use Bell's words – will need to look not only at the Chicago Boys or the Mont Pèlerin Society, but also at the army of middle-managers in the US, France, Brazil or India who have spread neo-liberalism to every corner of the planet.

This last point suggests that, if global intellectual history is to fulfil its potential, it must engage meaningfully with cultural and political history. The thick description of context is the necessary counterpart to the globalising of the field. There is plenty of evidence here to suggest that this process has already begun and the editors should be congratulated for bringing together such a thoughtful array of scholarship. I would expect this stimulating volume to become compulsory reading for all those interested in the history of ideas in Europe and beyond. But it should be treated more as a starting point than as a final statement: there is still a long way to go before a global – or even a trans-regional – mindset penetrates to the heart of intellectual history.

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