

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## Global Intellectual History

**Review Number:**

1547

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 20 February, 2014

**Editor:**

Samuel Moyn  
Andrew Sartori

**ISBN:**

9780231160483

**Date of Publication:**

2013

**Price:**

£24.00

**Pages:**

352pp.

**Publisher:**

Columbia University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-16048-3/global-intellectual-history>

**Place of Publication:**

New York, NY

**Reviewer:**

Julia McClure

This book is an important and timely reflection on the questions raised by the global turn in historiography. The contributor Duncan Bell describes this 'spatial reorientation' in the human sciences as a 'threshold moment' in the study of human imagination (p. 254). *Global Intellectual History* is a collection of essays on meanings and examples of global intellectual history edited by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori. It is split into three sections: 'A framework of debate', introducing the discussion, 'Alternative options?', containing the different approaches to global intellectual history, and 'Concluding discussions?.'

In 'A framework for debate?' Moyn and Sartori discuss the reasons for and implications of the turn to global history and the possible interpretations of global intellectual history. The editors explain that '*Global Intellectual History* 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' (p. 4). However, the most valuable contribution of this book comes not from its expansion of geographical scale, but from the way in which it relativises and interrogates the global concept. Moyn and Sartori write, tantalisingly, that 'it may even be that the expansive space that is today called 'the global' has never really

existed? (p. 5). From this perspective the 'global' shifts from object to subject.

The question 'what is global intellectual history?' is approached in different ways in each of the contributions. In the concluding remarks, Kaviraj notes that one reason for this is that, in the first instance, there are two interpretations of what intellectual history is. He summarises 'some historians want to understand how large intellectual ideas or trends cause the events that make history. Their object of epistemic interest is social history, in which they wish to assess the significance of the causal efficacy of ideals and intellectual processes. For a second group of scholars, the objects of analysis are the intellectual systems or processes themselves. The history they study is the history of their making, and "history"; in the broader sense forms its context' (p. 294).

The turn to global history raises many questions, and there is no consensus on what the 'global' is. The editors provide a useful delineation of three possible approaches to the 'global': 'first, the global as a meta-analytical category of the historian; second, the global as a substantive scale of historical process, and hence a property of the historian's subject matter; and third, the global as a subjective category used by historical agents who are themselves the objects of the historian's inquiry' (p. 5). This offers an alternative schema for global history to that already provided elsewhere.<sup>(1)</sup> Moyn and Sartori's delineation is useful for navigating the approaches offered in the following essays. The first two categories correspond with the ways in which other sub-disciplines of history have approached global history, but the third, approaching the global as a subjective category, illustrates the innovative way in which intellectual history can contribute to the development of global history.

The way in which concepts of the world are constructed is most visibly explored in Duncan Bell's 'Making and taking worlds' (chapter 11). Beginning with the ideas of Nelson Goodman <sup>(2)</sup>, Bell makes an important intervention in our understanding of 'global' and global history. He argues 'first, that the human sciences 'including intellectual history' can be conceived of as the study of practices of world making. Second, that global intellectual history can be characterized as a mode of social inquiry that focuses on articulations of 'globality'?' (p. 257). He emphasizes that spatial scale is not the issue, but how we conceptualise that space. This article provides a useful introduction to the historiography of intellectual history on this topic, although this could be integrated with other important works on the politics and epistemology of global concepts, especially Walter Mignolo's *Local Histories/Global Designs*.<sup>(3)</sup>

The politics and historical formation of global concepts is addressed in different ways by other chapters in this collection. Some of these chapters help to re-define the landscape of intellectual history. They question the idea of universal history which has been placed back on the discussion table by the emergence of global history.

The collection begins with Siep Stuurman's 'Common humanity and cultural difference on the sedentary-nomadic frontier: Herodotus, Sima Qian, and Ibn Khaldun'. This 'examines concepts and discourses about common humanity and cultural difference' in the writings of Herodotus, Sima Quian and Ibn Khaldun (p. 33). Beginning with this essay is interesting because it assumes that the discourses of common humanity and cultural differences are subjects of global history, but the way these discourses relate is not intensively explored. The essay argues that cross-cultural encounters are an important subject of global intellectual history and are important to understanding conceptualisations of cultural difference and discourses of common humanity. The examples provided indicate how discussions relating to global history have been formulated in different times and geographical regions and contribute to the pluralistic way in which we can conceptualise global history. The chapter would have been enhanced by situating itself in relation to existing global historiography; for example further exploration of the way in which civilization discourse relates to existing global histories would have been interesting. Only in the final lines of the conclusion is the position to global history briefly explained. Here Stuurman defines the cases explored as 'intellectual episodes in a global history of urban-agrarian 'civilizations', nomadic 'barbarians,' and frontier experiences', arguing that 'in the end, any global intellectual history is connected to definite long-term sociopolitical patterns of frontier experience' (p. 54). The following essays situate the model of global history offered by Stuurman as one example among many possibilities.

In 'Cosmopolitanism, vernacularism, and premodernity' (chapter three), Sheldon Pollock questions what is new or specific about the way we conceptualise globality today, and offers an exploration of the formation of 'premodern' cosmopolitan identities. He argues that while labels such as Hellenization, Indianization, Romanization, Sinicization, Christianization, Islamization and Russification are often used crudely, they 'signal the historically significant ways in which the past of being translocal, or participating ' and knowing one was participating ' in political and cultural networks that transcended the immediate community' (p. 59). Sheldon's work challenges the assumption that experiences labelled as global today are exclusively modern. He develops the example of the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' to make his case. While the synonymy of cosmopolitanism and global could be more clearly defined, his example offers an interesting insight into the role of language and culture in creating identities, ideas, and interactions beyond the local level. However, the power dynamics of these processes could also have been more clearly represented, since terms such as 'cosmopolitan transculturation' risk neutralizing the construction of cultural and linguistic hegemonies.

The link between global history and universal narratives of history is repeatedly confronted and challenged in many of the chapters. Rather than taking global history as synonymous with universal history, it interrogates the implication of this, and explores the legacy of Hegel. In 'Casting the Badge of Inferiority Beneath Black People's Feet': archiving and reading the African past, present and future in world history' (chapter nine), Mamadou Diouf and Jinny Prais explore the impact of European narratives of universal history on Africa and the ways in which African intellectuals have opposed this. Diouf and Prais remind us that the Hegelian notion of universal history 'had profound implications for black peoples' inclusion in modernity and history, as well as for their access to freedom and citizenship' (p. 210). The chapter explores how African intellectuals created 'new perspectives on Africa to critique and revise many of the Enlightenment principles and narratives, particularly the works of G. W. F. Hegel, that were used to support the European 'civilizing mission' in Africa' (p. 210). The inclusion of this chapter exploring the response of black thinkers to their exclusion from universal narratives of history is an important reminder that 'global' histories should beware claiming that they represent the histories of all people globally.

The problem of universals is approached in quite a different way in Christopher Hill's 'Conceptual universalization in the transnational nineteenth century' (chapter six) which explores possible methods and meanings of global intellectual history. He responds to the quest to define global intellectual history by exploring the process of the universalization of concepts (distinct from the universality of concepts), using the example of the ways in which European ideas such as 'civilization' and 'society' reached Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912). The chapter explores the ways in which European ideas reached and influenced Japan, but not the multi-directionality of such intellectual influences. Approaching the history of the migration of ideas in terms of a process facilitates the provincialization of universalisms, yet the concept

of universalization does not fully transcend the shadow of Hegelian universality. Statements including that the 'nation' was 'one idea universalized during the nineteenth century', will taunt some readers.

Readers taunted by the West-to-East movement of ideas in Hill's article, may feel more satisfied by Janaki Bakhle's chapter 'Putting Global Intellectual History in Its Place' (chapter ten), which aims to 'pose the question of the expansion of frames in order to move past a straightforward unidirectionality of influence and travel of ideas' (p. 233). This chapter contributes to the re-framing of intellectual history in a global context. Significantly, Bakhle's study is located within India and challenges Eurocentric models of history. It confronts the interactions between history, empire and the nation state. Bakhle uses the example of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, described as 'India's most controversial anti-colonial nationalist' (p. 228), to approach the question of whether there is a global intellectual history. He argues that it is important to 'confront a hidden assumption about both the origin of all authentically global ideas and the direction in which they travel'. The article seeks to challenge assumptions of the dominance of Europe in Indian intellectual history.

Venessa Smith's 'Joseph Banks's intermediaries: rethinking global cultural exchange' (chapter four) also interrogates our understanding of the way in which ideas are circulated and transmitted. Her approach is also methodological and questions the 'cultural intermediary' of global intellectual exchanges. It questions the model of the expansion of European knowledge by reminding us that this process has 'depended on cultural intermediaries willing to act as local informants, translators, and guides', as well 'as intellectual interlocutors able to negotiate not just between languages but also epistemologies, genres, and practices' (p. 82). The approach offered in this chapter uses the global context to confront latent Eurocentrism in intellectual history.

Samuel Moyn's contribution, 'On the non-globalization of ideas' (chapter eight), also contributes to the remapping of the landscape of intellectual history, particularly the movement of ideas. Moyn uses Haiti's revolution 'to inspire a new answer on how ideas can become global', and particularly 'Haiti's role in the new historiography of 'human rights'' (p. 187). In dealing with the history of human rights, Moyn naturally confronts the issue of universalism and explores it in a very interesting way. While human rights might be a natural subject for global history because they are a universalistic concept, Moyn also states the possibility that non-universalistic concepts globalize, but 'not according to the same logic' (p. 189). Moyn also confronts the question of agency, arguing that 'one interesting and potentially attractive feature of the model of truncation and fulfillment in global intellectual history is that it seems to offer a scheme in which apparently antagonistic elites and subalterns need each other' (p. 189). This sense of broad entanglements in global intellectual history is summarized in the conclusion, which reminds us that concepts that spread 'are not only bound up with larger political and cultural processes but also selected out of larger actual and possible sets of alternative concepts', and that therefore the non-globalization of ideas should also be part of global intellectual history.

The role of the global in global intellectual history is approached differently in Cemil Aydin's 'Globalizing the intellectual history of the idea of the 'Muslim World'' (chapter seven). Here the 'global' is not simply a forum for the circulation of ideas, but a context that produces new ideas. Aydin's work illustrates how the global context contributed to the production of the idea of the 'Muslim World'. This 'Muslim World' itself is an important example of a non-Eurocentric global concept.

Andrew Sartori's chapter, 'Global intellectual history and the history of political economy' (chapter five), explores how a history of political economy, specifically capitalism, might work in global intellectual history. Sartori asks what is the 'purchase of the concept of the 'global' in the intellectual history of political economy' (p. 125). He focuses on abstraction, arguing that 'global intellectual history is what intellectual history becomes once it begins to grapple with the problematic of real abstraction' (p. 128). Sartori stresses that, in the model of global intellectual history he presents, the 'global' is not a scale but a tool for discussing social abstraction. Sartori's argument is clear, but the chapter raises questions about other links between capitalism and global history, an issue overlooked by this collection.

Importantly, there are two sets of concluding remarks from scholars trained in different parts of the globe; Frederick Cooper, an American scholar who obtained his PhD at Yale, and Sudipta Kaviraj an Indian scholar who obtained his PhD from the Jawaharlal Nehru University. The concluding reflections to this book, from a self-proclaimed critic (Cooper) alert us to problems that remain with the 'global intellectual history' enterprise and the oversights in this book. Cooper equates the global with modernity, arguing that while they are supposed to help us think, these concepts are also 'straightjackets that, however much we seek them as antidotes to Eurocentric, teleological, nation-centered histories, push us into other sorts of confinements' (p. 292). However, Cooper's conclusions also don't acknowledge some of the strong, insightful and important arguments made within this book. Cooper argues that when the global circulation of ideas is discussed, the contextual framework of this circulation is really that of empire and in fact not global at all. Yet the idea that 'global' refers to a total global connectedness or scale is repeatedly challenged by many of the contributors. Many of the contributors also confront the dynamics of empire and its relationship with the migration and mutation of ideas, as well as the relationship between imperialism and universal constructs. It is true that we need to continue developing our understanding of the impact of imperialism on knowledge transfers and the role of colonialism in intellectual history, but this territory of inquiry is being expanded by the development of global intellectual history.

Despite the differences between the subjects and approaches of these chapters several issues recur and remain to be addressed further as the field of global intellectual history expands. The 'global' question repeatedly revealed tensions between the universal and the particular, or global and local, and between structure and agency. More persistently, the spectres of 'Modernity' and Eurocentricity often haunted the contributions. The burden of modernity in the collection is commented upon in the conclusion by Kaviraj, who observes that the contributions cluster around the 'birth of the modern' in the societies that they discuss (p. 296). This is also commented upon by Cooper, who writes that 'the concepts of "global" and "modern" are two-edged swords when it comes to understanding the world' (p. 292). Eurocentricity and the problematic category are old problems in the discipline of history; while not finding instant solutions, many of the examples of intellectual global history contained in this collection re-invoke engagement with these issues.

The articles do not combine to formulate a solution or doctrine to the question of what global intellectual history is, but they do provide a number of examples, suggestions, perspectives, and warnings. There is no agreement in the essays on whether a global intellectual history is a history of the global concept or an intellectual history/ history of ideas in a global concept. The design of the book creates a very interesting image of global intellectual history. Its introduction of the discipline through seemingly disparate examples illustrates a commitment to generate a de-centred perspective and create an open framework of discussion where pluralities can be represented and reoccurring issues confronted.

This review began with a citation illustrating the enthusiasm of Duncan Bell for this 'threshold moment' ushered by the global turn. In the same article, Bell also warned that, 'exerting an almost shamanic aura, the adjective 'global' routinely serves as a legitimating device for a vast array of practices and projects' (p. 254). *Global Intellectual History* outlines the exciting opportunities offered by the opening of this field, it also contributes to the development of global history by deepening our awareness of the politics, epistemologies, and pluralities of global concepts.

## Notes

1. For example, Pamela Crossley, *What is Global History?* (Cambridge, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (New York, NY, 1978).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The editors thank the reviewer for the generous and thoughtful attention to our volume, and do not wish to

comment further.

**Other reviews:**

Foreign Affairs

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140485/edited-by-samuel-moyn-and-andrew-sartori/global-intellectual-history> [2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1547>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/79430>

[2] <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140485/edited-by-samuel-moyn-and-andrew-sartori/global-intellectual-history>