Global History through the Lens of Intellectual History

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One thing that historians seem to agree on, is that 'global history' has no agreed meaning (Frankopan 2021). There is no consensual understanding of what global history might mean, beyond references to the global scale of historical investigation (yet the implications for this scale for writing history are ambiguous). Despite, or perhaps because of this conceptual and methodological vagueness, the merits and prospects of global history have been at the centre of ongoing debates, as this series of articles hosted by *Cromohs* aptly demonstrates.

Just over twenty years ago, in the beginning of the millennium, historians welcomed global history as an indispensable framework for understanding an increasingly 'globalised' world. Yet, over the past decade, historians have not only debated competing interpretations of global history (and sought to distinguish it from 'world' and 'universal' histories), but also questioned the desirability and even possibility of writing a history that could be defined as 'global.' As scholars seem to have started diagnosing the end of globalisation and a 'return of a divided world,' perhaps the historiographical and conceptual project of global history has also run its course (Braw 2024). This idea is not new. In 2017, Jeremy Adelman supposedly announced the death of global history, as he suggested that its celebratory approach to globalisation was no longer politically or intellectually sustainable. According to this view, the scholarly project of global history is closely linked to the rise of globalisation as an economic process and political ideology. Global history reflected therefore an excessive enthusiasm with all things global, to the detriment of other scales of analysis, such as the local, the national and the regional (Adelman 2017).

Has global history had its 'moment,' and is it now a thing of the past? Not necessarily. Indeed, as this forum has shown, debates about the scope and purpose of global history are still going strong. Yet perhaps this moment of general reckoning with the past and future of globalisation and global thinking might be an opportunity to reconsider how, if at all, global history as an interpretative lens can help scholars generate interesting and innovative historical studies.

In this piece, I will investigate how the 'global turn' in intellectual history might help indicate new directions for global historical research more generally. Did the 'globalising' of intellectual history embody a profound transformation of the discipline, and its spatial and conceptual boundaries, and if so, in what way? I don't think that intellectual historians have provided, so far, conclusive or ultimate answers to these questions. Yet, current debates about the fortunes and challenges of global intellectual history, and the attempts to imagine and reimagine the contours of a distinctly 'global'

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history of ideas, might give rise to fruitful strategies for the future development of global historical research.

It is curious to note that the 'global turn' in intellectual history happened not long before historians have started to pronounce global history dead. Intellectual history seems an obvious discipline to 'globalise': after all, one of its founding fathers, Arthur O. Lovejoy, stated that 'ideas are the most migratory things in the world.' Many historians endorsed the study of the history of ideas beyond their national or local context as a necessary move for intellectual historians even without using the term 'global history,' and promoting instead a 'social history of mobile knowledge' (Osterhammel 2007). But it was not until the 2010s that scholars openly engaged with the implications of undertaking an explicitly global, international and transnational intellectual history (Armitage 2014). While there is a somewhat greater consensus on the meaning of the 'international' and 'transnational' historical investigations, the conceptual and methodological meanings of the 'global' sphere for history writing remain open to interpretation.

One of the ways to substantiate a new discipline is by the establishment of dedicated publications, which seek to outline the contents of the field and delineate its boundaries. In the English language, the journal *Global Intellectual History* was founded in 2015 by Richard Whatmore to host publications in intellectual history that seek to make transnational and trans-temporal connections and prudently try to understand the values of ideas of other societies and individuals. The journal's declaration of scope and aims, which highlights the 'fluid identity' of intellectual history as a discipline, refers to the scholars who have inspired its foundation (*Global Intellectual History* 2016).

It is perhaps indicative of the state of the field that the journal's aims and scope statement refers only to English-language white male scholars, based at elite institutions in Britain or the United States: John Burrow, David Armitage and John Pocock. Without downplaying the evident merit of these leading individual scholars, the statement aptly reveals the same patterns of (unintentional, hopefully) exclusion that was signposted by the EUI doctoral students' letter in this forum. The focus on male scholars as inspiration for the foundation of *Global Intellectual History* is not just a casual omission but a reflection of more fundamental structural limitations. These structural patterns which, intentionally or not, have shaped global and intellectual history as male-dominated disciplines, represent an important obstacle to overcome through intentional and proactive engagement with practices of exclusion.

The journal's statement also makes reference to the volume of the same title, edited by American historians Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori. The collected essays, published in 2013 but based on a conference held in New York three years earlier, sought to iterate potential narratives for the emerging subfield, outline its advantages and challenges, and indicate paths for future research. The editors and the authors were wary of providing a consensual definition for their field of enquiry, yet various contributions suggested that global intellectual history was a new discipline. The variety

of voices that made the volume also included a sceptical afterthought by Frederick Cooper, doubting the very need to 'globalise' intellectual history, criticising the excessive temporal project on modernity, and suggesting that 'interconnected history' or even imperial history are more precise and effective approaches (Cooper 2013). The volume succeeded, despite its internal diversity, in opening up a debate about the interplay of global history and intellectual history, and the potential advantages that could be drawn from a cross-fertilisation of the two fields.

The Moyn-Sartori volume as a whole didn't offer an ultimate definition of 'global intellectual history' but it did outline a methodological vision based on a threefold heuristic: the first reflects universalist interpretations (macro-histories of ideas), along Hegelian, Marxist or liberal models, for example. Under this banner come also histories of the global, or intellectual investigations that seek to shed light on the ways in which past thinkers conceptualised and defined this sphere of human activity. The second approach is comparativist, seeking to bring together thinkers and concepts from different cultural and geographical contexts, to broaden the scope of intellectual comparison and, at the same time, examine non-western thought independently of the yardstick of western thought (indeed, such definitions as 'western' and 'non-western' should, in this view, be abandoned). Such approach recognises the false dichotomies of west/non-west, modern/premodern, centre/periphery, canonical/marginal, empire/colony and seeks to overcome them. The 'global' in this regard should not be intended as a restrictive category, implied simply as non-western or non-Eurocentric, but as an inclusive approach that seeks to abolish simplistic binaries in favour of more complex and nuanced spatiotemporal contexts (Mulsow 2017). The third approach explores networks, connections and interactions across space, embracing an implicit holism in which cultural differences can be mediated and established connections can overcome any border or closure.

The three approaches offer a critical position that seeks to expand the gaze of intellectual historians beyond the canonical Eurocentric and western historiography, and dissolve the exclusionary categories that have set constrains to the understanding of the history of ideas. In addition, these methodological guidelines invite a continuous reflection on the very meaning of the global, which has to be critically analysed rather than taken for granted. The methodology of global intellectual history seems to be based on reflection and inspection not only of historical sources, but also of the conceptions and interpretative frameworks employed by the historian.

These three heuristics also pose challenges of translatability and comparability, as the historian John Pocock noted in his review essay on global intellectual history. As global historians have noted, language remains a barrier not only for understanding and communication, but also for conceptualising ideas that transcend the historian's own cultural-linguistic sphere. Following Pocock, an important representative of the so-called Cambridge School in intellectual history and political thought, it's impossible to ignore the limitations that linguistic knowledge poses for the study of global history, intellectual or other. One solution may be incentivising historians to learn more

languages, and master different cultural and linguistic domains. In alternative, Pocock himself relied on translations to analyse political ideas in languages he cannot read, such as Chinese or Arabic. Neither solution is fully satisfactory. Linguistic pluralism relies not only on the individual accumulation of knowledge, but also on power structures that define the academic and cultural realm. Indeed, as Cooper and others have noted, the status of the English language as a global lingua franca and the Anglophone domination of the field (as professional prestige and development in academia still depends on publication in English-language journals and presses) generate low incentives for linguistic diversity. This limit is present in all fields of historical research, but is particularly marked in global intellectual history, which aspires to transcend western-centrism and criticise existing political and cultural hierarchies. The need to integrate multilingual historiographies puts a heavy burden on historians, which may be relieved through collaborative efforts and institutional incentives.

Returning to the three conceptual approaches to global intellectual history that the editors of the volume delineate, it is evident that the question of power and domination is an important undercurrent in the development of the new field. There is no assumption that the global sphere is equal, smooth or inclusive. Rather, global intellectual history does not move away from structures of power and domination. Global histories of ideas should, for the editors, embrace patterns of power and control as an essential aspect of the production of ideas, and explore the multiple ways in which exclusion, oppression and rule have shaped the emergence and circulation of ideas in a global context. Thinking about ideas as global rather than national or local does not erase their specific iterations and meanings (the global does not abolish smaller scales), but allows to comprehend—and criticise—their role on hegemonic forms of knowledge production on large scale (Bayly 2022).

A decade after its publication, the Moyn-Sartori volume remains a point of reference in the development of global intellectual history. Yet the advancement of the field has shown that the global scale of investigation does not (and should not) entail the exclusion or abolition of other scales of political order. Thus, global intellectual historians became interested in the relations between different scales, such as the global, the imperial and the national. Global intellectual history has incorporated concerns and concepts related to imperial history, investigating the significant imprints of imperial and colonial experiences on the production of knowledge across time and space. Thus, historians such as Shruti Kapila have shown how imperial orders have influenced the global movement of concepts and approaches about statehood, in ways that reflect and continue transnational hierarchies of power even after imperial collapse (Kapila 2021; Benton 2010). Rather than focusing exclusively on the 'global' scale, global intellectual history has engaged in reflecting upon the multiple ways in which different scales of political order interact and intersect.

Intellectual historians responded to the 'global turn' in their field with a mixture of enthusiasm and scepticism. For Rosario López, global intellectual history offers a

fruitful interpretative framework not only due to the multiplicity of spatial categories used, but also for the plurality of meanings attached to the very term 'the global.' The 'global' with its multiple meanings—a 'meta-analytical category of the historian' that is absent from the historical record but used as an analytical framework, a historical process of circulation and translation of ideas beyond the national sphere, or a 'subjective category' used by historical agents—amounts to a powerful critique of existing Eurocentric and canon-focused historiography (López 2016). Ann Thomson (2017–2018) also suggested that 'if we take "the global" to mean "simply the methodological concern with experimenting beyond familiar geographical boundaries" (Moyn and Sartori 2013, 21), then global intellectual history is to be embraced with enthusiasm,' while criticising more ambitious visions of the field as methodologically and conceptually problematic.

The growing scholarly enthusiasm with everything 'global' has been countered by ongoing scepticism regarding the need for a distinctly 'global' intellectual history. Thus, John Pocock, in his 2019 review essay on global intellectual history, doubted the viability of 'globalising' the history of political thought. Although Pocock's scholarship was mentioned in the 'Aims and scope' statement of the journal *Global Intellectual History* as one of the inspirations for its foundation, he seemed concerned that global intellectual history was steeped in the ideology of globality, a position which implicitly and explicitly prioritises the market over the state, and thus the economic over the political. Moreover, he suggested that the new focus on the 'global' undermined the notion of linguistic and cultural context, replacing it with the vague networks and connections that defined, for him, the global arena. Or in other terms, as he suggested, does global intellectual history presume a whiggish view of history that necessarily leads to globalisation, underplaying the alternatives or describing them as 'parochial' and 'insular,' and therefore implicitly negative and undesirable? (Pocock 2019). Pocock warned that global intellectual historians risk embracing globality while downplaying the afterlives of 'pre-global pasts' and dismissing the opposition and discontent that the processes of globalisation have created. Thus, by writing history from a supposedly global perspective, historians do not only choose a spatial framework, but also an ideological and political lens through which to read the past.

In my work as historian of ideas, I am intrigued by the global. What might people mean when they use the term global to study past phenomena? What new knowledge can this heuristic scale, this interpretative perspective, generate (if any)? How did the growing scholarship associated with 'global history' transformed our understanding of the 'global' as a scale of human action? Looking at scholarship in global intellectual history, it seems to me that one of the strongest potentials of the 'global' study of the past relates to the potential use of the 'global' category as a critique of existing hierarchies of power which have shaped not only the modern world but also the conceptual categories historians use to analyse it. Yet this critical function can only be effective if global intellectual history can overcome simplistic categorisations, including overused binaries such as western/non-western, the 'west' and the 'rest' or

centre/periphery, and the division of the world into supposedly distinct entities such as civilisations, religions and cultures. The 'global' can generate conceptual transformation and a reconsideration—but not necessarily the abandonment—of existing categories.

Assuming that the global scale is important for explaining human actions is, therefore, hardly a neutral position, but needs to be justified, explained and conceptualised. While acknowledging the roots of the global perspective in distinct political and cultural experiences, the global is neither the mere expansion of the gaze to include 'everything' and 'everywhere,' nor should it be seen exclusively as the expression of the ideological and historical process of globalisation. As scholars have sought to distance global (intellectual) history from globalist ideologies and processes, many feel that this approach has not yet realised its transformative and emancipatory potential. To do so, a historical engagement with the 'global' as a concept or a spatial category should include a critical assessment of the processes of globalisation and the condition of globality and their different consequences for different communities and individuals around the world.

As intellectual historians have shown, global history writing requires a degree of reflectivity to overcome, at least partially, the methodological and conceptual challenges linked to this approach. For example, global history entails a promise of convergence and inclusion, which can be realised only if it transcends the conceptual categories and practices of the Anglophone academe. In this sense, looking at global history through the lens of intellectual history can help shed light on the emergence, the uses, and the meaning of such categories in past debates in different linguistic, geographic, cultural and political contexts, to help understand and overcome them.

Global history will continue to face challenges such as translatability, commensurability and comparability, but these are not unique to historians of the global sphere, or to those who seek to trace historical problems of global reach. While new technologies (including AI and advanced translation tools) may help historians decipher texts in languages they do not master, and thus access new sources and historiographies, the ability to fully comprehend multiple cultural, semantic and historical contexts remains a highly-specialised skill. These ever-present challenges require scholars to intentionally transcend their historiographical insularity through continuous debate, collaborative efforts, critical analysis and reflectivity. Yet beyond overcoming the obstacles of comprehension, global historians would do well to engage in a critical reflection on the conceptual frameworks that guide their studies. Here again the critical lens of intellectual history may prove useful for dismantling restrictive binaries. By doing so, global history can, at its best, become a non-hierarchical collaborative project that is continuously shaped and reshaped by the contributions of scholars from different parts of the world. In this view, the European and American viewpoints would eventually become just some among many potential interpretations of the global.

In trying to envisage the future of global history, it seems necessary to extend the vision to multiple futures, to imagine multiplicity of interpretation as a necessary and desirable condition of any historical examination that seeks to engage with the global condition. The three approaches proposed by global intellectual historians—universalist, comparativist and connected histories—may provide initial guidance for charting the potential of this discipline. But these heuristics should not be considered as ultimate or definitive. Rather, the discipline's future might carry an ongoing relevance and interest if historians will succeed in generating creative interpretations of the very meaning of the 'global.' The lack of consensual interpretation of the global can be a blessing or a curse: I suggest viewing it as an invitation to intervene in a debate that would inevitably touch upon methodological and theoretical questions, but cannot shy away from other, political concerns. Writing global history requires considering the implicit and explicit political aspects of this project, as the global is not a neutral concept or spatial lens. Such an endeavour may require sharpening the conceptual and interpretative toolbox, but can also bear significant fruit for specific research projects as well as for this field of study as a whole. By seeking to understand what the *global* might mean—today, as well as in other times and places—we can generate new questions about the project of writing global history now.

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