

Analytical Concepts for Transcultural Settings. Pathways in Global Intellectual History

LUC WODZICKI and SEBASTIAN CONRAD
Freie Universität Berlin

Introduction

While intellectual history—and its cousins, conceptual history and the history of ideas—can look back on a long pedigree, the field of global intellectual history is of comparatively recent origin. One of its main challenges consists in capturing the multifaceted and diverse character of the global past while operating within a disciplinary framework that is premised on the dominance of Anglophone scholarship and a Western worldview. This tension, between an anti-Eurocentric agenda and institutions that tend to reproduce forms of Eurocentrism, has been with this new field from its inception.

In a recent article on the state of the art of global history, Francesca Trivellato has argued that reflecting on the ways we study global history is more important than defining what it *actually* is.¹ Concepts that help mediate between historical reality and present-day interpretations play a crucial role in this process. The study of the past demands attention to the voices of historical actors and requires historians to respect, understand, and take seriously the systems of thought from which they originate. This imperative casts a spotlight on the intricate tension between analytical concepts, often rooted in Western or colonial epistemologies, and actors' concepts, whose meaning is no longer transparent to us but requires careful unpacking.² Historians are thus tasked with achieving a balance between specialised knowledge that is sensitive to historical contexts and accessibility to a broader academic audience, compounded by the necessity of employing English as the lingua franca of global history.

In the broader field of global history, therefore, scholars of global intellectual history often take on the role of mediator. This role is crucial in navigating the delicate interplay between global narratives and local realities. Abstracting historical realities into more generalised categories is particularly vital in global history due to the vast temporal and spatial scales involved. But since many of the concepts—such as 'empire,' 'migration,' 'religion,' or even 'enlightenment'—need to encompass diverse experiences

¹ FRANCESCA TRIVELLATO, 'The Paradoxes of Global History,' *Cromohs: Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.36253/cromohs-15297>.

² MARGRIT PERNAU, 'Provincializing Concepts: The Language of Transnational History,' in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36, no. 3. (2016): 483–99; JAN IFVERSEN, 'Traveling Concepts. On the Road with Margrit Pernau,' *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 19, no. 1 (2024): 1–12.

and perspectives, they become so broad and general that they risk flattening historical reality in ways that make the specificity of each case invisible.

Thus, the first task of the global intellectual historian is to ensure that the voices of historical actors are heard, even when their concepts and narratives do not neatly align with the historian's own analytical frameworks. This role is pivotal in bridging the gap between the multifaceted expressions of local thought and experience and the concepts and narratives of present-day historians that are not able to capture such non-conforming realities.

From this follows an equally important second mediation role: the task of contextualising and correlating diverse local contexts without succumbing to the pitfalls of essentialisation. In this role, global intellectual historians must carefully reconstruct the interconnected but distinct nature of local realities, ensuring that each is understood and represented in its own right. This includes a deep engagement with the cultural, linguistic, and situational nuances of actors' concepts, ensuring that even notions that appear legible to us are not stripped of their local significance. These concepts are rooted in specific vernacular contexts but can also be employed in communicative situations that may diverge from their typical local meanings. Thus, the historian's task is not only to trace the threads of these local narratives as they weave into the global fabric but also to preserve their unique texture and colour, ensuring that the global historical tapestry reflects the rich and varied hues of human experience across time and space.

In their classical forms, intellectual history, history of ideas, and conceptual history may struggle to address these matters adequately. Originating primarily for the exploration of European or Anglophone contexts, these approaches traditionally extended their scope beyond these realms mainly for comparative purposes. This origin implies that adapting to new methodological and theoretical challenges requires a willingness to critically reevaluate and possibly revise their foundational principles. Since the publication of Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori's seminal book *Global Intellectual History* (2013),³ and the inception of the journal with the same name (2016), the field has undergone a rapid evolution. The dialogue between Rosario López, a representative of a new generation of intellectual historians, and the late J. G. A. Pocock, is a particularly enlightening example.⁴ López, reviewing Moyn and Sartori's contributions, agrees that while global intellectual history is expanding in practice, it needs more theoretical reflection within the discipline. She criticises the enduring influence of the classical Cambridge School for its text-centric approach and its focus on the political significance of texts, ideas, and thinkers, suggesting that this has led to a limited and somewhat insular view. López advocates for a reimagined, inclusive, understanding of 'context' to overcome these barriers.

³ SAMUEL MOYN and ANDREW SARTORI, eds, *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁴ ROSARIO LÓPEZ, 'The Quest for the Global: Remapping Intellectual History,' *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 1 (2016): 155–60; J. G. A. POCKOCK, 'On the Unglobality of Contexts: Cambridge Methods and the History of Political Thought,' *Global Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–14.

Pocock also recognises the necessity to overcome the Eurocentric biases inherent in traditional intellectual history but insists on the central role that context should continue to play in global intellectual history; meaning ‘the ongoing conversation within a vocabulary and idiom formed by a society or constellation of societies for the purpose of asserting, empowering, and discussing itself.’ For Pocock, context is to be seen from the perspective of political thought and theory and is strongly cultural or civilisational (‘spatio-temporal contexts constructed by identifiable societies’). In his vision, global intellectual history is a narrative about how previously separate civilisations, each with their own political languages, systems, values, etc., from around 1500–1700 CE, slowly come into contact and influence each other.

This exchange expresses the two most significant differences between Pocock and López when attempting to think of intellectual history in global contexts or writing it as global intellectual history: (1) The vision that global intellectual history is a grand narrative of intellectual integration, significantly shaped by Europe, versus global intellectual history as a discipline that is paradigmatically, methodologically, and theoretically open and seeks to undermine the prior assumption. (2) The emphasis on the weighty importance of political (including intellectual) culture on one hand versus the emphasis on the innovative power of the actors on the other, that may undermine not only the political culture we place them in but, with that, also our very vision of that political culture.

Reflecting on these insights, scholars of global intellectual history are increasingly called upon to confront a difficult challenge: has global intellectual history reached a juncture where it can acknowledge the interconnectedness of ideas and people, and not force such ideas into the traditional containers of nation, culture, or civilisation? As long as it is understood as an extension of the Cambridge School, global intellectual history risks limiting itself to examining whether historical interactions are predominantly between cultures or civilisations as abstract constructs, or between individuals entrenched within these frameworks. To be sure, it is undeniable that constructs such as religion, language, nationality, and political affiliation have historically possessed substantial and tangible significance for individuals. But traditional intellectual history has been hesitant to acknowledge the degree to which actors themselves have already been able to challenge, confront, and even transcend these large and essentialising categories. Such challenges extend not only to grand categories such as culture or civilisation, but also to more concrete categories that nevertheless bear the traces of Western normativity.

What analytical language does global intellectual history require to make it possible for historical actors, as it were, to ‘talk back’? How to create a vocabulary that is able to capture and make legible such alternative narratives without diluting their distinctiveness? This dual responsibility underscores the importance of the work of global intellectual historians in fostering a more inclusive, nuanced, and interconnected understanding of global history, where diverse perspectives are not just acknowledged but are integral to the construction of comprehensive global narratives.

In this thematic section of *Cromohs*, scholars who worked together in the *Graduate School Global Intellectual History* at Freie Universität Berlin contribute to this larger problematic by placing particular emphasis on two aspects: ‘Analytical Concepts for Transcultural Settings.’ They have chosen this title to highlight two challenges for global intellectual history today. First, how we perceive history globally is subject to constant change, requiring a degree of analytical flexibility, which should also be reflected in the way we write and work about it; and second, the established terminology of the field is not always able to capture the multiple perspectives of historical actors, and therefore, a more dynamic and inclusive approach to conceptualise this experience is needed. The authors speak of ‘transcultural settings’ in order to suggest that cultural and political boundaries frequently did not coincide and cannot necessarily be located on a modern map.

In this vein, the contributions in this thematic section emphasise the global intellectual historian’s role in weaving the threads of transcultural settings and analytical flexibility into the fabric of global history. They approach this task by focusing on particular concepts and illuminating, questioning, or even reshaping them in light of a particular case study within the authors’ field of expertise. Paulina Dominik’s exploration of Seyfeddin Thadée Gasztowtt’s life uses the analytical lens of *biography* to underscore the critical role of individual actors in shaping *global moments*, thereby reinforcing our understanding of the personal dimensions and of individual agency within global intellectual exchanges. Daniel Kolland’s interrogation of the concept of *modernity* continues this conversation. He inquires when, how, why, and where intellectuals around the turn of the twentieth century used the concept of modernity, revealing semantic and pragmatic differences between the historical concept and our contemporary ‘macro-periodisation.’

Sébastien Tremblay’s contribution, drawing on the potential of *queerness* for global history, further amplifies the need for analytical concepts that transcend fixed categories and embrace the fluidity of identities and experiences. Luc Wodzicki’s study of the *transculturality* of virtue in the early modern Mediterranean takes up this thread and serves as a reminder that shared intellectual cultures existed beyond the rigid boundaries often assumed by traditional historiography. Leonie Wolters’ analysis of M. N. Roy’s assertions of equivalence as a form of *translation* reveals a cosmopolitan practice of equating ideas across disparate contexts. Her focus underscores the importance of understanding the ways in which ideas are adapted and recontextualised in different cultural and political settings, offering valuable insights into the construction of global narratives.

Together, these reflections underscore the importance of thinking about intellectual history as series of transcultural engagements, and of the need to adapt our analytical apparatus to that. Each article, in its own way, challenges conventional perspectives, seeking to arrive at a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the interconnected world we inhabit.