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Connected global intellectual history and the decolonisation of the curriculum

Abstract

Connected global intellectual history can contribute to the process of decolonising the curricula by decentring Europe and resituating it as part of an interconnected world. From this perspective, Europe is dis-placed from being imagined as the source of knowledge and the Western tradition is unbound. This article shows how cultural and intellectual phenomena of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the tradition of universal history, which have been seen as emanating from Europe, were produced by global processes. The concepts produced by these intellectual and cultural movement cannot be confined to European units of context but rather had global lives. This paper shows how looking at the connections of global intellectual history in general, and the influence of the Americas in particular, can contribute to the decolonisation of the curriculum.

Key Words

Global intellectual history, decolonisation, education, medieval, renaissance, enlightenment

Introduction

The ‘Rhodes must fall’ student protests which began in 2015 brought greater attention in the UK to the need to decolonise education institutions and the curricula they offer. This led to an expansion of literature focusing upon the decolonisation of the university, which developed upon the longer histories of postcolonial theory and decolonisation (see Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018). Students questioned not only the institutional sites of their education and the relationships with colonialism, but also the subjects they are taught and the knowledge that is produced by these institutions. University College London (UCL) founded the campaign ‘why is my curriculum so white’ (Hussain, 2015), which began as critique of the lack of diversity in courses and reading lists, but quickly became a deeper critique of the Eurocentrism of courses and an investigation on connections between historic knowledge production and colonialism (see Peters, 2015). For many scholars familiar with the last decades of postcolonial and subaltern studies scholarship there was nothing particularly new about this critique, but what was new was the growing student-led pressure for a broad ‘decolonisation of the curriculum’ across all subjects in UK universities. Since its rise in the 1990s, global history has created new insights into the ways in which the histories, cultures, and structures of inequality have been connected through processes of imperialism and capitalism and connected forms of cross-cultural exchange. The more recent expansion of the sub-discipline of global intellectual history has offered critical insights into the ways in which not only our economic but also epistemic systems have been globally connected (see Moyn and Sartori, 2015). This chapter offers an introduction into these developments in global intellectual history. It provides a brief overview of studies on the intellectual and cultural connections across medieval Eurasia, and then focuses in particular on the Americas to showcase how the Old world was created by New and to suggest how Latin American may continue hold valuable lessons for Europe in its latest attempt at decolonisation.

Meera Sabaranyam, Chair of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group, explained that students did not want to remove white philosophers such as Plato and Kant from their reading lists, but ‘a greater representation of non-European thinkers, as well as better historical awareness of the contexts in which scholarly knowledge has been produced’ (Sabaranyam, 2017). Crucially, the process of decolonising knowledge and knowledge production is not only about diversifying syllabi (although this is surely needed), but about exposing deep connections that had hitherto been obscured. It is, for example, shifting understanding of Kant as a European producer of European knowledge that was later diffused around the world

and distorted, to a thinker who was produced by and writing for the context of Europe's expansion of its global empires (Flikschuh and Ypi, 2014). The decolonisation agenda will be successful if it is aimed not only at pluralising but also at systematising; to demonstrate how, whatever our place in the world, the making of our fortunes and our misfortunes are connected. In this article I argue that connected global intellectual history can support the decolonisation of curricula by offering insights into the interconnected nature of our past and providing a framework for analysing deep connections. This approach of connected global intellectual history is decolonial as it deconstructs diffusionism, the colonists' model of the world (Blaut, 1993), and reconstructs the world as a multi-nodal web of ideas where, by the early modern period, European thought was also constructed by its global imperialism and by the cross-cultural exchanges embedded within this context.

The connected histories model of global history is the methodology of unbinding historical subjects from the contextual categories (nations, cities, regions) that have constrained their analysis. Global history is the methodology of taking off the blinkers. Histories of islands such as Britain do not respect the topographical edges of the white cliffs of Dover or the shores of Cromarty and Fair Isle. The momentous social changes of revolutions are not limited to certain cities (Armitage and Subrahmanyam: 2009). The industrial revolution that boosted economic growth in Britain in the nineteenth century would not have been possible without slavery and resource appropriation in its global empire (Beckert: 2015). Socio-economic crises are not confined to certain regions (Parker: 2013). The borders of post-Westphalian nations are permeable to goods, diseases, and people, albeit some more than others. By removing the straight-jacket of traditional historiographical routines, the connected histories model of global history makes possible a disciplinary approach which brings into focus the micro-interactions between local conditions and global processes that have created the world in which we live.

The need to study histories which are 'not separate and comparable' but connected was laid out by the global early modern historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Subrahmanyam: 1997, 748). Focusing on the simultaneous emergence of millenarianism across Eurasia in the Early Modern period, Subrahmanyam illustrated how Eurasian was shaped not by parallel but connected histories, where the local was in dialogue with the global. The significance of the connected histories branch of global history was further developed by Gurminder Bhambra, who stressed the need to scrutinise 'the historical connections generated by process of colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and appropriation' (Bhambra, 2014, 3). An archaeology of these connections is a way of excavating and examining the interconnected global making of the inequality regimes which underpin our current global condition. This inequality has also had epistemological dimensions, caused by the obfuscation and erasure of the role of non-Europeans in the making of global cultures and concepts. European intellectual cultures have themselves arisen by European scholars looking at other parts of the world, in this article we will examine the different ways in which the 'Old World' was made by the 'New', and in the conclusion reflect on the lessons that Europe can learn today by looking at the strong traditions of decolonising education that developed in Latin America in the last decades.

European Renaissance Unbound

According to many scholars of the Renaissance and UNESCO world heritage, the concept and artistic style of the Renaissance was born in Florence, and then spread to Italy and the rest of Europe. This traditional view of the Renaissance was developed in the nineteenth century, especially by Jacob Burckhardt, who saw the Renaissance as development of Italian culture, which led to the European discovery of the world and the birth of modernity. Burckhardt wrote that discovery began with the Italians because they were "freed from the

countless bonds which elsewhere in Europe checked progresses” and were driven by a ‘passionate desire to penetrate the future’ (Burckhardt, 1990, 171, 174). Yet while the Renaissance which took place between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries has long been constructed as a European achievement, and the architecture of Italian cities such as Florence have been seen as symbols of this, the Renaissance was a global phenomenon produced by cross-cultural dialogues. The idea of the global renaissance is not a plurality of renaissances emanating from different locations, but an awareness of how micro intellectual and cultural exchanges around the world constituted the Renaissance as the first globally formed cultural movement.

From the time of the Han dynasty in China and the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean world, East and West were connected by a series of trade routes known as the silk roads. These were conduits not only of goods but also of ideas and cultures. Frederick Starr has described central Asia between the 8th and 12th centuries as a ‘cauldron of skills, ideas, and faiths’, which we must study in order to recover ‘lost enlightenments’ (Starr, 2015). Silk road emporiums such as Baghdad and Samarkand were sites transcultural exchange and historic centres of learning. During the Golden Age of Islamic Science, the Houses of Wisdom in Baghdad were places mainly Islamic but also Christian and Jewish, met and translated texts into Arabic and conducted their own experiments. Islamic scholars in the Middle East also encountered ideas from elsewhere in Asia. For example, the Muslim scholar al-Fazari was influenced by Hindu astronomy. The biographies of these pre-modern itinerant scholars, such as that of Leo Africanus (d. 1554), inform us of the multiple possibilities for intellectual exchanges that existed between East and West and which help us to dissolve this binary. From the Middle Ages, European pilgrims also used the silk road nexus to travel to the Far East, encountering the knowledge and cultures from around the world and raising awareness of these in Europe (McClure, 2018). Across late medieval and early modern Eurasia, the flourishing of culture and scientific discoveries grew out of a connected world. Architectural icons of the Italian Renaissance have been viewed through the lens of global history and recognised as the product of cross-cultural exchange. For example, Piero Sanpaolesi, has suggested that Brunelleschi’s cupola in the heart of Florence may have been inspired by the dome of the mausoleum of Il-khan Öljaitü, built in the Persian city of Soltāniyeh in the early fourteenth century (Sanpaolesi, 1972). The period between the 8th and 14th centuries has been described as the Golden Age of Islamic Science, when many intellectuals in the Islamic world made significant contributions to the fields of mathematics, the sciences, and also the arts. From the perspective of the global intellectual history of the Middle Ages, compared with the sophistication of the medieval Islamic and Indian worlds, the breakthroughs of the European Renaissance were just catching up (Burke, Clossey, Fernández-Armesto, 2017).

The European Renaissance was not only shaped by historic Eurasian connections but the also the shockwaves that reverberated across the Atlantic from the profound epistemological disruption wrought by the European encounter with the Americas, a vast continent that was home to societies as diverse as the potlatch practicing communities of the far North West, to the Mapuche communities of the Southern Andes, and home to the tightly-organised urban centres of the Aztec and Inca Empires, as well as the agro-ecological communities such as the Tzotzil, Chontal, and Guaraní. As a result of colonial violence and the importation of new diseases, indigenous populations drastically declined, and much indigenous culture was destroyed. Indigenous material culture made from precious metals was often melted and repurposed as bullion to oil the wheels of the first global economic system. Many records of indigenous knowledge, culture, and history, such as the codices (parchment documents) were destroyed. For example, in the mid-1530s the Franciscan Juan de Zumárraga ensured that all the remnants of the royal archives of Texcoco were burnt, and

in the 1560s the Franciscan Diego de Landa oversaw the burning of scores of Mayan codices and images. Global connections in the sixteenth century became orientated towards the strategic erasure of indigenous culture and knowledge (McClure, 2016). In addition to this history of death and destruction there is an equally important history of survival, resistance and influence which is continued to this day by indigenous communities across the Americas.

A global history approach to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reveals that attempts to erase indigenous culture were not entirely successful. While Franciscans had been involved in destroying Amerindian culture, they were also engaged in its documentation and preservation. Franciscans established an Amerindian school in Tlatelolco in 1536, and such institutions provided some sanctuary for indigenous intellectuals (see Tavárez: 2013 and McDonough, 2014). Here Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590) worked with indigenous scribes and artists to produce the monumental twelve volume codex, *La Historia Universal de las cosas de Nueva España* (*The Universal History of the Things of New Spain*), or Florentine Codex. The text was seen to be dangerous as it saved too much Amerindian culture, and in 1577 Philip II ordered the seizure of the manuscript for investigation by the Council of the Indies (Baudot, 1995, 493-504). The codex was confiscated and sent to Spain, but this was not the end of its journey. It became known as the *Florentine Codex* (*Códice Florentino*), since like many other cultural products of the Americas, it ended up in the Medici collection in Florence. Although it had been prohibited for preserving too much of a ‘pagan’ past, there is evidence that it was consulted while in Florence. One artist, Ludovico Buti, appears to have had the images of its exotic birds in his head as he painted the ceiling of the Uffizi’s Armeria in 1588 (Markey, 2011). Few people passing under this classically Renaissance ceiling would imagine that its design was influenced by Amerindian artists, working in a Franciscan school on the edge of Mexico City in the sixteenth century to document their history and culture. Global history makes us sensitive to the possibilities of connected histories in the most unlikely of places and the importance of amplifying voices that have been erased or marginalised from the historical record by these connections.

The Americas also impacted the European Renaissance in less subtle ways. The material culture of the Americas transformed the material and visual landscape of Europe. Not only did the chocolate, chile, and pineapples (and much later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the potatoes and tomatoes) change the flavour palate of Europeans, the colour palette of European paintings would not have been possible without the indigo and cochineal from the Americas. The extraction and processing of these materials required the knowledge of indigenous artisans. Further, while strict cultural codes governed the iconographic content of paintings, the visual culture of the Americas made its way into Renaissance art in ways that are only just being recognised. At the start of the sixteenth century the material culture of the natural world of the Americas began circulating in Europe. Before long, distinctly Latin American visual and material culture such as feather art, began influencing Renaissance painting; for example, look closely at Correggio’s *Venus with Mercury and Cupid* (*The School of Love*), ca. 1535 and you see that the wings of these Renaissance angels are suspiciously similar to those of Amazonian parrots, possibly inspired by the graphic studies of Albrecht Dürer (1471 –1528) (see Fane, Russo, Wolf, 2015).

Beyond the visual and material landscape, the intellectual currents of Renaissance thought in Europe were often in direct response to the challenges posed by the so-called New World. Most obviously, the School of Salamanca and its contribution to jurisprudence and the history of international law advanced by protagonists such as Francisco de Vitoria (died 1546), developed in response to the questions posed by Amerindians and their culture. Amerindians were not passive receivers of European laws but actively translated and interpreted Spanish laws (Cummins and Rappaport, 2011). Amerindians engaged in a petitions system, appealing directly to the Crown, and consequently played a role in shaping

the legal ecology of the Spanish Empire. Renaissance humanism, and its particular contributions to the history of law and moral theory in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was shaped as much by the New World as the Old.

European Enlightenment Unbound

The Renaissance was not an endogenously European cultural movement, and nor was the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Dorinda Outram first challenged the normative conception of the Enlightenment as generated by elite men in the public spheres at the heart of Western Europe, by pointing to the roles of non-elites, women, and marginalised European regions (Outram, 1995). At the start of the global turn scholars began to explore how the Enlightenment was produced outside Europe. In *How to Write a History of the New World*, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra examined the Spanish American construction of the Enlightenment, which was produced by, often an often oppositional, dialogue with Europe. Cañizares-Esguerra explained that ‘representatives of the Enlightenment in New Spain who participated in the debate [about the rediscovery of Aztec monuments in the central plaza of Mexico City] were explicitly attempting to develop a critique of Eurocentric epistemologies (Cañizares-Esguerra, 2002, 267). From this perspective the global Enlightenment already contained within it a criticism of European claims to epistemological dominance. The dynamics of colonialism in Latin America led to the creation of new epistemological regimes, variously described as ‘hybrid’ or ‘transcultural’, that were dialogically connected to but not dependent on, European discourses of Enlightenment.

The epistemological regime of the European Enlightenment has been understood as a pillar of colonialism, engineering exclusionary notions of the human and theories of race (Mignolo, 2011). As Europe expanded its colonial power during the Enlightenment it sought to obscure entanglements, and to claim create hierarchies of knowledge and to present innovation as European. Obscuring the entanglements of our connected epistemologies was part of the process of European colonisation. Europe was imagined as a centre of producing knowledge that was classified as ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’, while the rest of the world had ‘folklore’ and ‘beliefs’. To decolonise the colonial hierarchies of our knowledge regimes is therefore not necessarily to look to the ‘Rest’ for alternatives to the ‘West’ but to deconstruct the colonial veiling of the ways in which epistemologies have been connected.

The concept of democracy has often been depicted as a European concept, born in Ancient Greece and coming to maturity during the European Enlightenment. Walter Mignolo challenges the Eurocentric teleology of concepts, explaining that the concept of democracy ‘did not travel from Greece to Enlightenment Europe to the Spanish colonies’, but took a ‘colonial detour’ via the world (Mignolo, 2011, 232). In histories of democracy, England’s Glorious Revolution of 1688 is seen as laying the intellectual foundations for the emergence of democracy in North America, and the French Revolution of 1789 is seen as fomenting the Haitian Revolution of 1791. Yet, as Robin Blackburn argued, ‘the revolutions – American, French, Haitian, and Spanish-American – should be seen as interconnected, with each helping to radicalize the next’ (Blackburn, 2006, 643). Concepts such as democracy did not simply emanate from Europe during the Enlightenment, but were the products of global conversations, afterlives, and echoes, with no one iteration being more ‘authentic’ than another.

From this perspective, democracy does not lose its originality or authenticity when used, for example, by the Zapatistas, or other radical indigenous activists in Latin America. The history of Latin America had participated first in the global Renaissance and then in the global Enlightenment. Today the Zapatistas work with concepts such as democracy derived from the global Enlightenment and indigenous strategies of agro-ecology and resource management such as the milpa derived from the Maya to produce a ‘world in which many

worlds are possible'. The Zapatistas use organisations of production inspired by Karl Marx and environmentalism inspired by the Maya to build their communities in the LaConda jungle. The Zapatistas demonstrate the importance of connected global intellectual histories. Their project to build a 'world in which many worlds are possible', is not an attempt to build a series of disconnected, contiguous worlds. The Zapatistas are in critical dialogue with the connected world as they seek to decolonise the way in which the world has been connected by capitalism and to fight the environmental degradation it causes. Their project of ecological egalitarianism is radically local, built up through cleansing their soils of the agro-chemicals of industrial capitalism and critically global, in dialogue with the global systems of imperialism and capitalism. The role of democracy in indigenous projects such as the Zapatistas are not evidence of the globalisation of European concepts, but rather evidence of the global life of concepts in a world that remains connected though imperialism and capitalism.

Further, as we see from today's migration crisis, rise of populism, and climate change denial, the idea that 'Enlightenment values' such as democracy, tolerance, or science are somehow purest at the sources in the Western world where they supposedly originated, is unsustainable. As one enlightenment historian recently observed, 'today science, liberty, and toleration are recognised to have also been patchier and more 'provincial' at their putative sources in England, France and the Netherlands' (Filafer, 2017, 111). What needs to be decolonised is the colonial mythology that Europe had some kind of exclusive monopoly on the production and consumption of certain concepts, or that the European articulation of ideas are the ideal types, to use the Weberian category, while the rest of the world looks back at Europe through a distorted mirror.

Back to the Future: From Universal to Global Intellectual History

Universal history is another supposed outgrowth of European Enlightenment history. The genesis of the notion of universal history is attributed to the Prussian scholar Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) in his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784) and developed further by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 - 1831) in his *The philosophy of history* (1824). The European tradition of universal history has been seen as responsible for erasing the agency of non-Europeans and their histories. Hegel, for example, condemned African culture as prehistoric and blamed Africans themselves for New World slavery. The decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo called for 'decolonial local histories, restoring the dignity that the Western idea of universal history took away from millions of people' (Mignolo, 2000, x). It is important to uncover the multitude of local historical traditions that have been erased by the coloniality of global connections, but it is also important to examine projects of universal history as resulting from global connections and, like the concept of democracy, having multiple global afterlives and echoes.

Hegel's theory of universal history was not a narrative that developed exogenously in Europe but was the product of global events. Susan Buck-Morss posits that Hegel's theory of universal history and justification for continued slavery was influenced by the events of the Haitian revolution, even though he does not refer to this. Buck-Morss contends that Hegel contributed to the historical erasure of the Haitian revolution in Europe in order to construct a narrative of universal history that legitimated the continuation of African slavery and white domination (Buck-Morss, 2000). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concepts that have been seen as emanating from Europe were often the result global interactions created by the dynamics of European imperialism. Within this dynamic, Western scholars were often reacting to and influenced by subaltern voices. The Old World was produced by the New World as much as the New World was by the Old.

Texts such as Hegel's *philosophy of history* have been seen as part of a canon of the Western intellectual tradition. Re-reading canonic texts through the lens of connected global intellectual history challenges assumptions about the bounded nature of the contexts that engendered these texts. Texts produced and published in Europe were nevertheless the products of global connections, and their authors were increasingly aware and anxious about this global context and the dynamics of global imperialism.

If in Europe universal history emerged as a reaction to world events, elsewhere in the world European colonialism had produced alternative universal history projects. One of these we have already encountered in this article was Sahagún's *La Historia Universal de las cosas de Nueva España*, which was produced in the sixteenth century by Christian missionaries and Indigenous scribes in the New World in order to create a certain depiction of the Aztec past that would not be seen as heretical. While produced in this missionary colonial context, it also drew upon the cosmological traditions of the Aztec world. Later in the sixteenth century, the Mestizo (mixed race) Inca Garcilasco de la Vega produced his monumental history of the Incas, *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*. In this text, Mark Thurner argues, the history of Peru 'was born global not only as a proper history but at the same time as a colonial critique of history' (Thurner, 2015, 29). This text was used in the late eighteenth century by the Peruvian scholar and statesman José Hipólito Unanue, to interpret Peruvian history as a form of universal history in order to reclaim the Peruvian origins of the Inca Empire. Elsewhere Catherine Walsh has examined how Andean scholars, such as the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, engaged with European thinkers such as Kant but were not applying European Ideas to the Andean context but thinking critically from the perspective of Latin America in dialogue with the power dynamics of the West (Walsh, 2007). Through the lens of global intellectual history we see that the dynamics of imperialism connected different regions of the world and produced different projects of universal history, which were both distinct from and in dialogue with Europe.

This article addresses the question of whether history, so long entangled with European imperialism, could be used in the decolonisation process. Through the lens of connected global intellectual history we see that this question itself did not emerge first in European universities. As Mamadou Diouf and Jinny Prais explain, in the twentieth century many African and black writers, such as W. E. B. DuBois, were engaged in the international debates about modernity and questioned the role that history could play in the decolonisation process (Diouf and Prais, 2013). Diouf and Prais explain that 'deploying new universalising narratives derived from Enlightenment and imperial discourses, they [black intellectuals] sought to establish connections among a diverse and widely dispersed black community and, at the same time, delineate a space for Africa in world history as a way to validate specific political claims and to proclaim a past and future role for all black people in human history' (Diouf and Prais, 2013, 205). They argue that 'early black thinkers from Africa and North America grappled with their political exclusions from empires and nations by turning to world history and locating Africa in it as a means to counter and repair the universal narrative of history that had excluded them' (Diouf and Prais, 2013, 221).

Conclusion

In one of the first publications of the decolonisation of the curricula movement, Michael Peters wrote that the 'critical question for me is whether the Western tradition has the intellectual resources within to transform itself and come to terms with the historical effects and traces of racism that are invested in our institutions and in our knowledge traditions' (Peters, 2015, 645). Connected global intellectual history provides the methodologies for deconstructing the notion of an endogenous 'Western tradition'. Cultural movements from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, which have been seen as emanating from Europe, have

actually been the result of global dialogues. Connected global intellectual offers insights into the ways our pasts have been connected and the ways these connections have produced entangled epistemologies. Connected global intellectual history can bring the co-production of knowledge out of the colonial shadows. This revokes the colonial conceit that Europe is the source of key concepts, where they are somehow purer and become polluted by distance. Instead, unbound from restrictive units of context, we see that concepts have had global lives, and that the 'Western tradition' is but an echo of a global conversation.

Finally, while the movement for the decolonisation of the curriculum and universities has grown stronger in the UK in recent years, once again Europe has much to learn from Latin America where the decolonisation of universities movement has developed for decades. In 1968 the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997) wrote the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which explained how good teaching 'strives to unveil reality, unmask its mythicizations, and achieve a full realization of the human task: the transformation of reality in favour of the liberation of the people' (Freire, 1970, 83). This work established the field of critical pedagogy which has informed movements to decolonisation education around the world. In 1997 the Indigenous Forum of Oaxaca recognised the role of schools in colonialism and the suppression of indigenous knowledge and in 2001 the *Universidad de la Tierra* was established using the principles of critical pedagogy to provide education for marginalised communities in accordance with indigenous values and the recognition of the importance of the natural world. Similar education programmes were established in Zapatista communities in Chiapas, foregrounding the importance of the environment in learning and teaching sustainable agro-ecology. As the UK moves towards decolonising universities and the curriculum it may be aided by looking to the examples established in Latin America and the ways in which they have placed the decolonisation of the environment at the heart of decolonial education.

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