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Arcs of Ideas

International History and Intellectual History

The internationalization of ideas is an old idyll, and an old anxiety. “The invasion of ideas has followed on from the invasion of the barbarians”, the aged François-René de Chateaubriand wrote in 1841, in his last reflections on the new “universal society” which was no more than a “confusion of needs and images”: “when steam power will have been perfected, when, together with the telegraph and the railways, it will have made distances disappear, there will not only be commodities which travel, but also ideas which will have recovered the use of their wings”.¹

This universe of fluttering and floating ideas is at first sight exhilarating for intellectual history. A world in which ideas soar across the frontiers of distance and nationality is also a world full of ideas, and a world of opportunity for intellectual history. But all is not, I fear, as encouraging as it appears. The international or transnational turn which is such a powerful preoccupation of present historical scholarship may even, in the end, be subversive of the old enterprise that Marx described disoblingly in 1847 as “sacred history – the history of ideas”.

These dangers can be illustrated by a different picture, or a pair of pictures, from the romantic scene of the 1840s. The first is an engraving called “A Promenade in the Sky” by the great artist Jean-Jacques Grandville, the portraitist of the French commercial bourgeoisie, which was published in 1847. It shows a vast arc through the starry heavens, in which a new moon is metamorphosed into a mushroom, an umbrella, an owl in flight, a pair of bellows, a spindle, a coach drawn by three horses, and eventually into the milky way. The second image is called “Crime and Expiation”, and it also shows an arc in the sky, of a very different sort. It is an arc of sinister clutter; the metamorphosis of a murder scene into a cross, a funeral urn, a dagger, a pair of distorted scales, a disembodied eye, a fleeing horsewoman, a broken turret, a carnivorous fish. These are depictions of ideas. But the ideas are changed beyond recognition, in both pictures, as they float or fall through the sky.

1 René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, Paris 1973, p. 715.

The nineteenth century epoch of intense interest in long-distance or transnational connections – the period that has been so important to Jürgen Kocka’s own interests, since his early investigations of Werner Siemens’ involvement in the 1860s with the Indo-European telegraph line to Calcutta – can illustrate both the opportunities and the perils of the transnational turn. The opportunities, undoubtedly, are very substantial. The mid-nineteenth century preoccupation with global commerce is itself a wonderful subject for the intellectual history of philosophical ideas. Chateaubriand’s metaphors of the telegraph and electricity – in which the press was “the word in the form of thunder; it is social electricity”, and the cholera epidemic of 1832 was the “distant gaze of Vishnu”, an “electric spark” – or Grandville’s earlier drawings of assiduous-looking ants packing and unpacking crates of opium in the “Formicalian Empire” (“Rule Formicalia!”), were only among the more ornamental expressions of a literally worldwide interest in global communication, and its consequences for the new universal society.

There is in this sense a history of (to use an inelegant expression) the “idea of globalization”. There is also a history of the transnational or global contexts of other nineteenth century ideas, including ideas of the nation, or of social improvement. Much of the most distinguished nineteenth century intellectual history of recent decades has indeed been transnational *avant la lettre*, and it has also been history which transgresses the frontiers of different sorts of historical inquiry. There is a history of the French sea-shore; of the multiple and multilingual sources of the *Communist Manifesto*; of the Atlantic setting of late nineteenth century social reform; and of ideas about ideology in late Meiji Japan, including the process of dissemination of ideologies, in a society preoccupied both with the worldwide economy and with worldwide words: “*Egoizumu, oriinaru eremento, kosumoporitanizumu, purofuesshonaru man.*”²

But the transnational turn is also full of dangers for intellectual history, as I suggested at the outset. It is connected, in particular, to at least four of the direst difficulties with which intellectual historians have been concerned, and which in turn explain the less than flourishing condition of the subject, or sub-subject.

The first difficulty has to do with reification, or with the tendency that R.G. Collingwood called “substantialism”, in which events are important “for the light they throw on eternal and substantial entities”. Ideas are not

2 See Alain Corbin, *Le territoire de vide. L’Occident et le désir du rivage 1750–1840*, Paris 1990; Gareth Stedman Jones, Introduction, in: *The Communist Manifesto*, London 2002; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Cambridge, Mass. 1998; Carol Gluck, *Japan’s Modern Myths. Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*, Princeton 1985, p. 110.

things, and one of the continuing presumptions of recent intellectual history has been that the reification or hypostasisation of ideas into timeless entities is to be avoided at all (or almost all) cost. Liberty of commerce is not a thing; Adam Smith was not a fount of things, but an individual, with intentions and incoherences.

All this is eminently sensible. The difficulty arises, in relation to transnational intellectual history, from the circumstance that ideas of liberty are succeeded by receptions of ideas of liberty, which are succeeded by new ideas of liberty, new receptions, and so forth. This is the Grandville problem, of the arc of ideas over time, in which ideas are succeeded by similar ideas, across the entire expanse of time which divides an idea (in the past) from the historian's idea of the idea (in the present.) But it is particularly intense in relation to arcs of ideas over space *and* time. The dissimilarities of apparently related ideas, as in Grandville's bad arc of bric-à-brac, are particularly conspicuous in relation to the exchanges of ideas over long distances in space, language, and culture.

The reception of Adam Smith's ideas in Germany, which I have myself tried to examine, with a great deal of inspiration from Kocka and his students, provides an illustration. Smith had been transposed into an adjective in German (*Smithsche*) within a few years of his death in 1790. In the 1860s, the noun *Smithianismus* became widely used, to describe the ideas of economists and publicists, especially, but not exclusively in Germany; to identify what was referred to as a universal *Kosmopolitismus*, in relation to an absolute *Weltökonomie*.

The ideas of Smith's followers, it seemed, had soared or sailed far away from Smith's own ideas. The Rostock law professor Hermann Roesler, who was the principal theorist of the new term, indeed came to the conclusion, which he described as "at first glance astonishing", that "Socialism is the pure consequence of *Smithianismus*".³ But individuals, too, sailed away from their own ideas, or their own earlier selves. Roesler himself left Germany in 1878 for Japan, where he became the most influential foreign legal adviser on the Meiji constitution, an exponent of "social law", a personal representative of the emperor in negotiations in Belgium and China, and, in the words of a memoir of 1905, "developed over time into an enthusiastic Japanese".⁴

The second difficulty for transnational history has to do with context, or contexts. Another sensible presumption of recent intellectual history is that

3 Hermann Roesler, *Über die Grundlehren der von Adam Smith begründeten Volkswirtschaftstheorie*, Erlangen 1871, p. 36.

4 Johannes Siemes, *Hermann Roesler and the Making of the Meiji State*, Tokyo 1968, p. xi; Yasuzo Suzuki, *Hermann Roesler und die Japanische Verfassung*, in: *Monumenta Nipponica* 4 (1941), pp. 61, 78.

ideas should be understood in their own contexts. If one wishes to understand Herman Roesler's late nineteenth century views of *kokutai*, or Japanese national polity, for example, then it would be unhelpful to immerse oneself in the disputes over *tennosei ideorogii* (the ideology of the emperor system) in the 1940s. But this reasonable admonition, too, poses particular problems in relation to transnational intellectual history. For transnational history imposes a capacious kind of context, both in relationship to distance, or the array of contexts over space (German, Belgian, or Japanese), and in relation to varieties of context: rhetorical, political, social, cultural, legal or economic.

It imposes a concern, above all, with the most awkward of all these contexts, which is the context of economic history. If transnational intellectual history is considered to be no more than the history of ideas about transnational relationships, then the connection to economic history is evident. But even if it is understood more extensively, as the history of ideas or individuals who have traversed national frontiers, there is a connection to economic life. To traverse frontiers is to do something which imposes economic costs, and the vectors of exchange – shipping, the freight of books, printing, imports and exports, emigration, the telegraph, colonial administration, foreign investment – are also, in many cases, the subject matter of economic history.

The contexts explored in recent intellectual history have consisted, for the most part, of the linguistic, the rhetorical, and to a lesser extent the political. This has the important advantage that the (historicist) history of ideas has been able to avoid the awful destiny of what Max Weber described, in his criticism of nineteenth century historical political economy, as the “anthropologically veiled mysticism [of] the decadent period of emanatist logic”; a conception of ideas as no more than emanations of the culture of the times, or of the “soul of the Volk”.⁵ But the context of transnational ideas, like the context of economic thought, must be, at least in part, an economic context. Even if the historian's concern is only with the intentions of a particular (economic) theorist, she must be concerned with the economic information which influenced the theorist's theories. So too must the historian of transnational ideas. To investigate the economic context of ideas has been to run the risk, at least since the 1840s, of a materialist version of determinism; to conclude, in reaction to what Marx called “Hegelian *viellerie*”, that ideas are no more than the emanations of “productive forces”, or “material relations”. This is a risk that would have to be engaged with, and overcome, in a transnational history of ideas.

⁵ Max Weber, Roscher and Knies. *The Logical Problems of Historical Economics*, London 1975, pp. 205f.

A third and even more familiar difficulty has to do with the “presentism” of intellectual history. To restore past individuals and their ideas to their own context is also to “put them in their place”, in the colloquial sense of reducing them to their own less than universal condition. Adam Smith, the retiring man of letters in a small seaside town in Fife, is a less imposing figure than “Smith”, or “Smithianismus”. But the historian, by choosing, in the present, to study particular past ideas, is asserting a relationship between the past and the present (or her own present). She is saying, implicitly or explicitly, that the ideas are important to her, for one of many possible reasons; that they are similar to present ideas (Grandville’s arcs of likeness over time), or that they were important in their own context or other contexts, or that they had an influence on events (such as revolutions, or wars, or political reforms) which were themselves important.

Transnational intellectual history, again, imposes a particularly exigent engagement with the present. The whole enterprise is itself presentist, in the sense that the transnational turn is influenced, in evident respects, by the late twentieth and early twenty-first century public controversies over “globalization”; by the circumstance that in the 2000s, as in the 1890s, the 1840s and the 1770s, there has been an increase both in long-distance relationships of investment, commerce, and information, and in reflection on these relationships. But the history of transnational ideas also poses particular difficulties for the purist position in which ideas are evanescent, and there is no continuity of ideas over time. For the discontinuousness of ideas is juxtaposed, in many of the subjects of transnational history – imperialism, or race, or language, or colonial laws, or environmental change – to the redoubtable continuity of legal institutions, racial consciousness, environmental conditions, economic history, and historical memory.

Ideas are not things, but they are embodied in things (such as memorial arches), and they are the causes of things (such as constitutions.) The connection between the historian (in the present) and the ideas (in the past) is constituted not only by the circumstance that the historian is interested in the ideas, but also by the circumstance that many other individuals have been interested, over the entire intervening period, in the same or similar ideas; that the ideas, which are discontinuous, are connected to institutions which are continuous over time. Empires and the movements of peoples, the great subjects of transnational history, are indeed among the most important sites of collective memory. Even transnational enterprises have histories, and the website for Siemens-India, in 2005, refers to the London to Calcutta telegraph line of 1867.

The final difficulty is the most serious. This is the problem of class. The disrepute of intellectual history, in recent years, has much to do with the circumstance, described rather starkly by the American historian Nell Irwin

Painter, that “intellectual history deals with the thought and culture of highly educated people”, and “there’s a class division between the two kinds of history, intellectual and cultural, sometimes exacerbated by race and/or gender”.⁶ The class division corresponds, in turn, to the old, semi-serious classification of thought into high (or the formal thought of the highly educated), medium, and low (or the thought of everyone.) It corresponds, too, to the gravest of all the failures of histories of ideas, whether intellectual or cultural, which is that only the high, or the great, or the highly educated, have been the subject, in general, of histories of the individual mind, or the individual self. It is “high” individuals who have had intentions, and lives; everyone else has been part of a society, or a culture.⁷

This failure, which is also a failure of moral imagination, is to a substantial extent imposed by the availability of historical sources. As Nell Painter also observed, intellectual history has mostly been about people who were “liable to have their thoughts published and their journals saved in air-conditioned repositories”. In this respect, once again, the prospect of transnational history is apparently particularly daunting. To the extent that the transnational turn has led historians to concern themselves with the colonial or the conquered periphery of the European-Atlantic world, it has led them away from air-conditioning; and to the extent that individuals who transgress frontiers tend to die in odd places, or to lose their letters, or to have their journals eaten by rats, even the evidence of “high” people’s thoughts is elusive.

All these anxieties, about reification, context, presentism, and “classism”, are old concerns of intellectual historians, and they are particularly intense, as I have tried to suggest, in relation to the transnational or international turn. But I want to conclude with a more encouraging suggestion, that the anxieties are also opportunities. I said at the outset that the juxtaposition of intellectual history and transnational history might turn out to be subversive of the sort of sacred or sacramental history of ideas that Marx described as “*viellerie*”. This is in part because it would be subversive of some of the familiar classifications of different kinds of individuals, and different kinds of ideas. Men and women changed their nationality, language, social class, and intellectual identity in the course of the elaborate journeys which were so characteristic of the universal society of the nineteenth century. Ideas changed, too. Or rather, the similarities between ideas assumed strange and inconstant forms.

6 Nell Irwin Painter, *Interchange. The Practice of History*, in: *The Journal of American History* 90 (2003), p. 591.

7 See Lynn Hunt, *The Origins of Human Rights in the Eighteenth Century. Toward a Post-Foucaultian History of Personhood*, www.isop.ucla.edu/cms/files/global1.pdf.

The multiplicity of contexts, in respect of transnational intellectual history, can itself be a liberation. It offers an escape from what the economic historian François Simiand described in 1904 as “le *Zusammenhang* social” of the “historien historisant”, in which “everything is connected in social life; at a given moment, for a given people, there is a strict connection between the private, economic, juridical, religious, political and other institutions of this people”. The preoccupation with the *Zusammenhang*, for Simiand, tended to perpetuate the “traditional grouping of human facts according to country, nation, political unit”, and it was thereby unsuited to the investigation of economic life, with its trusts, cartels, and oceanic journeys, of commodities and investments.⁸

The journeys of ideas are also oceanic, and they are sometimes dizzying for the historian. I became interested in mid-nineteenth century objections to *Smithianism*, in the course of writing about Adam Smith, because I thought that I ought to take seriously the very different understandings (of Smith as a precursor of socialism, for example) to which so many scholars had been committed for so many years. *Smithianism*, or the Smith-reception, led me to Hermann Roesler, and Hermann Roesler led to Japan. Roesler also led to the *Kulturkampf* in northern Germany in the 1870s, because it turned out that he had joined the Catholic church, and been dismissed from his professorship in Rostock, shortly before he left for Japan. There was even an intriguing history of the Roesler-reception, in that a Japanese law professor happened to have found a manuscript of Roesler’s writings on the Meiji constitution in a Tokyo antiquarian bookshop in 1925; the writings were translated by a German Jesuit in Tokyo, Johannes Siemes, who was later one of the survivors of and most eloquent witnesses to the bombing of Hiroshima. These are, I suppose, arcs of ideas and contexts, or arcs of idle historical curiosity. But the odd journeys of Adam Smith’s reception, like the odd journeys of Professor Roesler, were reproduced many thousands of times, in the long nineteenth century of global connections.

This connected world created its own historical evidence. It is certainly the case that the letters of travellers, or itinerant legal scholars, were from time to time lost in shipwrecks, or eaten. But the experience of long-distance travel was at the same time intensely productive of journals, letters, wills, and other expressions of the sense of loss. The disruptions of movement meanwhile produced a rich source of evidence about the lives and ideas of individuals who were not literate, in the legal records of alien offices, passport offices, frontier police, customs and excise offices, civil

⁸ François Simiand, *Méthode historique et science sociale*, in : *Revue de synthèse historique* 5 (1902), pp. 3, 135–138, 144.

jurisdictions and foreign consulates.⁹ There is in this sense a micro-history of migration, or inheritance, or expulsion, which can also be a history of transnational ideas.

The correspondence of worldwide or multinational enterprises in Persia and elsewhere is another source for a transnational history of economic and cultural ideas. The transnational turn can contribute, in this respect, to the recovery of economic sources for different kinds of history. Economic history has come to be defined by its methods (which are the methods, in general, of pure or applied economics), more than by the subset of the world which is its subject matter. One of the adverse consequences of this asceticism has been that many aspects of economic life – including the ideas and sentiments that are expressed in the course of buying, selling, borrowing and investing, or that influence economic policies – are of interest neither to economic historians nor to other kinds of historians. This is a loss for everyone, and a loss of opportunity in relation to historical sources. But it is just these opportunities that would be imposed upon intellectual history, at least in relation to the nineteenth century, in the course of the transnational turn.

A transnational intellectual history can even elude the most exasperating of the distinctions which the history of ideas has inherited, into high, medium and low thought. The idea of a process of diffusion by which philosophical principles influenced the thoughts of large numbers of people was of almost obsessive interest in the nineteenth century, and it was from the outset an idea of transnational change. It was in particular an idea about the principles of the enlightenment and their political consequences, in France and elsewhere. The later criticisms of Smith, in relation to the “rationalistic Enlightenment of the understanding”, were concerned, in this spirit, with the influence of economic ideas on French philosophy, and of French philosophy on political and religious ideas, in France and elsewhere. Lord Acton concluded in 1881 that “government with the working class” was the irresistible consequence of Smith’s ideas of freedom of contract: “That is the foreign effect of Adam Smith – French Revolution and Socialism.”

But the process of diffusion of ideas was not only, in these nineteenth century prospects, a matter of the “high” and the “low”. The English economic writer Walter Bagehot described his father-in-law James Wilson, the founder of *The Economist*, as a man of “‘middle’ principles” or “‘intermediate maxims’”: he was “a great *belief producer*”, who diffused the truths, or the ideas, which were “‘in the air’ of the age”.¹⁰ *The Economist*’s own max-

9 See Caitlin Anderson, *Britons Abroad and Aliens at Home. Nationality Law and Policy in Britain, 1815–1870*, unpub. University of Cambridge PhD dissertation 2004.

10 *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, London 1978, pp. 330ff., 337.

ims were for the most part about overseas commerce, and James Wilson died in Calcutta, in the course of trying to introduce the first income tax to India. The intermediate ideas of the times, the ideas disseminated in business weeklies, economic textbooks, and reports of fiscal policy were also transnational.

The idea of a world full of ideas and beliefs was itself a nineteenth century obsession. The “multiplication of ideas” was for Sir Henry Maine, writing in 1874, the distinguishing characteristic of the modern “West”. The “fewness of ideas” was by contrast the condition of infant societies, and of the modern “East”; there was a “difference between the East and the West, in respect of the different speed at which new ideas are produced”. But even the “West” was hardly uniform. One of the earliest critics of Adam Smith in Germany, the romantic economist Adam Müller, thus identified Smith with the *Begriff*, or with an Anglo-French interest in abstract concepts, in contrast to the *Idee* which he identified with Edmund Burke: “the concept passes and the idea endures”. By the early twentieth century, it was the *Idee* which had come to seem concrete and almost French, and the *Begriff* ethereally German. The psychologist Hippolyte Taine, meanwhile, could find very little in the way of ideas in England: “One can compare the interior of an English head fairly exactly to a *Murray’s Guide*: many facts and few ideas.” This buzzing, busy world of ideas has been one of the enduring preoccupations of historical investigation, in histories of information, histories of ideology, histories of mentalities, histories of the book, and in the *Begriffsgeschichte* of Reinhart Koselleck. It is an endlessly elusive world, because it generates so little evidence of thoughts, and how they change over time. Charles Baudelaire said of Grandville, the artist of the celestial arcs, that “he spent his life looking for ideas, sometimes finding them. But because he was an artist by trade and a man of letters in his mind, he was never able to express them very well.” This is an ominous prospect for historians, as well.

But the history of transnational exchanges of ideas can point, eventually, to a history which is newly modern (or post-post-modern), in the sense that it is freed, at last, from some of the direst inheritances of earlier modern times. One of these nineteenth century inheritances was the presumption that the history of ideas could be reduced to the history of material relations. Another was the presumption of social context, or of the embracing and national *Zusammenhang*, to which ideas could be reduced, or by which they could be explained. Yet a different endowment was the presumption of late nineteenth century economic theory, in its most utilitarian, scientific and egalitarian mode; that all individuals had the same desires, and that none of these desires had anything to do with ideas.

These inheritances, after more than a century, are no longer ours. A transnational history of ideas, which would also, in part, be a history of economic ideas, and which would certainly be an odd and transgressive history, a history of odd lives, could contribute to the disinheritance. It would even be a nineteenth century sort of history, in which ideas were not entirely unlike things. This was the presumption, at least, of one of the most widely read of all nineteenth century romantic works, *Don Juan*, which was also a history of the transformation of identity across space and time:

“But words are things, and a small drop of ink
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.”