

From Universal to Global

Real Challenges and Utopian Hopes for the Global History of Knowledge

▼ **FORUM ARTICLE** in *Decentering the History of Knowledge*

▼ **ABSTRACT** In this paper, I argue that the global history of knowledge may become an empirical substitute for philosophical epistemology. I present a fundamentally Braudelian vision for such a history, prioritizing long-term and large-scale analyses rather than simply focusing on travel and exchange. Finally, I argue that the material conditions that are best suited to the global history of knowledge may be found outside of the United States, where the professional reward structures and the existing structures of funding may not support collaborative work over longer periods of time.

▼ **KEYWORDS** History of Science; Historical Epistemology; Historical Materialism; Global; Research Funding

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BREPOLS

“How do we know what we know?” is one of the most common ways to express the central question of epistemology. Historical epistemology brings temporal depth to the question by asking the question in the past tense. A global approach takes the universalizing “we” and gives it many real faces. At its limit, by providing a study of all parts of the world at all times, the global history of knowledge delivers with some empirical certainty answers that epistemology could only hypothesize on. Global history of knowledge is what comes next for historical epistemology. Global is the historian’s answer to the philosopher’s universal. The global is the common—or, at least, the long-lasting and the widespread—and it holds the promise of delivering something that is cognitively akin to theory.¹

Like the universal, the global gives us distance from singular things, people, places, and episodes. It is a specific kind of distance that has to do with location at the micro and the macro scale. I find that social and geographical location are complementary analytics. The global history of science that I have in mind is not cultural histories stitched together or what I sometimes call “week globalism” in reference to the practice of devoting a week to each part of the world in university courses. It is, rather, fundamentally informed by social and economic history and suggests going back to the intellectual forks of the 1970s and 1980s, choosing Braudel over Foucault, and returning to the study of mentalities.² The most knowledge-forward approaches may not necessarily work the best when it comes to understanding knowledge in a large and structured world turning at a glacial speed.

While many scholars identify with what is often called the global turn, no single scholar is so well endowed that they can cover the entire globe by themselves. At the individual level, global is a kind of sensibility. No one has to “go big or go home” when trying to contribute to the global history of knowledge. Nevertheless, I believe those of us who work under the rubric have some responsibility to make our work commensurable or at least tentatively comparable to other work. Scale and space are crucial components of a global history. And while we may confine ourselves to our own area studies, I think there is now proven merit to reading broadly about other times and other places. That to me is the main intellectual task of a global historian of knowledge.

Travel and exchange are certainly important elements of such a history, but I always find myself asking whether it may also limit inquiry and take us away from higher ambitions. How do we distinguish between travel and exchange

1 I, of course, understand that the vision I am presenting here is both somewhat compatible with and somewhat divergent from the earlier forum discussion in this journal. See, for example, Van Damme, “When Practices”; Sarasin, “More than Just Another”; Östling and Larsson Heidenblad, “Fulfilling the Promise.”

2 Burguière, *The Annales School*, esp. 152–57. The different conceptions of knowledge, or rather the place of knowledge in history, according to Braudel and Foucault have also come up in Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea.”

as events, as *conjonctures* or as *longue durées* in our analyses? Does the fact that similar ideas or practices exist in different places suggest exchange? How does geographical exchange interface with temporal transmission?³ What do we do when we encounter a sense that may be shared across geographies, something that emerges from a practice or an ancient text, which ultimately does not require any express exchange between living human beings? Deploy the notion of culture or civilization? And, perhaps most crucially, where should we as globalists place our benefit of the doubt when we are thinking? Should we assume travel and exchange unless proven otherwise? Or should we deny meaningful exchange until proven? Although his conclusions remain open to expert assessment, I think Viktor Bläsjö's recent article asks a specific version of these questions in its assessment of whether Copernicus owed anything to his Islamic predecessors when he formulated his heliocentric astronomy.⁴ Did Copernicus actually read Islamic astronomy, or was he simply following the same practical logic of Greek astronomy as Muslim astronomers were? From my perspective, the practical logic of Greek astronomy itself would not have survived without the Islamic predecessors. And the case can be made that specific contributions from those predecessors are at any rate far less important than their ability to cultivate sophisticated astronomical practices over a long period of time and a large geographical area.

The question of travel and exchange is an extension of the question of pluralism. Starting with travel and exchange suggests that we believe in the fundamental plurality of knowledge. And we are at a certain stage of pluralism right now. But is that also the future? Are we also open to the notion that once we accumulate a sufficient number of pluralities, certain patterns suggesting a typology—best exemplified by G.E.R. Lloyd's and Nathan Sivin's recent work—or a basic unity may emerge?⁵ Or will pluralism lead to more pluralism, to individualism and beyond? Without veering one way or another, I would like to propose that we should treat epistemic pluralism as an empirical matter and remain open to taking stock of changing views from time to time. Because of this belief, my approach remains local, but not philosophically localist.⁶ I am optimistic, but by no means committed, that once much research has been designed with the global in mind, we will find a lot that is common across geographies and will be better able to frame the question of pluralism.

To start with something that is fundamentally global-minded rather than to try and extend an existing analytic, say, drawn from Western science will certainly help us move forward faster. One example that I have been able to use to some effect in my courses is to keep the focus on astrology, calendars, and almanacs when teaching the history of early modern astronomy, instead

³ This question has been posed very well in Althoff, Berrens, and Pommerening, *Finding, Inheriting or Borrowing?*.

⁴ Bläsjö, "Critique of the Arguments."

⁵ Lloyd and Sivin, *The Way*.

⁶ Kuukkanen, "Senses of Localism."

of comparing different theoretical approaches and cosmological schemes. To the best of our knowledge, the almanac was one of the most common genres of astronomical writing in the early modern period, and it was not specific to any single culture. Research may reveal an earlier phase of exchange that was responsible for the spread of the genre, but, nevertheless, at the end of the sixteenth century, you could find almanacs—documents that include some astronomical and calendrical information—in practically every urban environment. And calendrical concerns were widespread across geographies: The Julian calendar, the Ottoman Rumi calendar, and the Chinese calendar started to look untenable for state purposes right around the same time.⁷ That, to me, is a good way to start the history of astronomy as the global history of knowledge. Research that is framed globally from the ground up may also have the potential to transform the history of astronomy's earlier interest in theories and cosmologies. The mere existence of theoretical approaches to heavens suggests something very interesting: a well-developed culture of celestial inquiry; a demand and a supply of people who could devote time, resources, and energy into intellectual endeavors of no discernible practical consequence; and genealogies of sustained scholarship and many other parameters in place that would merit the use of the word "science."

I primarily identify, like Yulia Frumer, as a historian of science rather than a historian of knowledge, but I also find knowledge to be both liberating and edifying for some of my work.⁸ I think a socioeconomic sensibility combined with the latitude provided by the word "knowledge" enriches our understanding of the scientific enterprise itself. In my past work, I have tried to provide a materialist explanation for our disposition to lean into our problems (practice) and our disposition to take a step back from them (theory) while we are seeking knowledge. I drew my initial inspiration from a perennial problem in American higher education. While science may not teach you how to do your proverbial taxes, it does allow you to take a step back to understand what taxes are and why taxes exist. I have argued that this cognitive distance, made possible by leisure, is what makes scholastic knowledge possible in the first place. To me, leisure is also the distinguishing quality of what many people call Western science. Of course, everyone is fundamentally capable of taking a step back from a question, but what then keeps them asking the question at all? My answer was the university and its ability to maintain a specific register of conversation, which ultimately means Aristotelian philosophy and the intellectual heritage surrounding it. I realize this is a rather specific attempt at finding the kernel of science—the effort itself may draw ire, as may the very narrow genealogy I suggest. But I believe similar queries about the fundamental disposition of an inquirer may inform the global history of knowledge.

7 The readings I used for this unit were: Westman, "The Copernican Question"; Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 61–106; Sahillioğlu, "Sivış Year Crises."

8 Frumer, "What Is and Isn't"

To maintain some intellectual consistency, I would also like to offer my materialist account of what I think the global history of knowledge is. To put it very briefly, the global history of knowledge is the science of knowledge, and its purpose is to provide cognitive distance from more specific inquiries. I believe, maybe mistakenly, that this is also the sense in Lorraine Daston's "The History of Science and the History of Knowledge."⁹ Since global is a way to distance ourselves from our already temporally distant inquiries into the past and our theoretically distant approach to science, it suggests a more robustly scholastic disposition. Thus, it also requires a more mature, more populous, and better-resourced field of scholarship than many of us currently have. I understand that such optimism about the future of the history of science is warranted in certain parts of the world. It may even come easily in the German-speaking world, where knowledge (*Wissen*) and science (*Wissenschaft*) are so closely related. But we—those of us in the United States—owed much of the attention and the resources we received to the magical effect of the word "science." And, considering the current distribution of resources, studying the history of knowledge for the sake of the history of knowledge remains a challenging proposition. Professionally, many of us cannot simply take our sight away from science, and our engagement with knowledge is likely to feed back into our understanding of science. Besides, many of us who have a desire to contribute to the history of knowledge rather than the history of science have likely picked up the habit from our non-American colleagues. Simply put, I think the history of knowledge has a more promising future outside of the United States than within it.

To frame this same question in a way that is more in line with the internal dynamics of the history of science, the global history of knowledge summons to the table unlikely scholars, people who may not have qualified as historians of science a few decades ago. Historians of science, particularly from the 1970s onward, have tried to temper the hard-nosed conventional histories of science that did not see the astrology in astronomy, the alchemy in chemistry, or the occult in physics. For someone of my vintage, this expansion appears to have taken the profession to a point of convergence with a neo-Zilselian attention to craft. Finally, work done on other parts of the world have not only shown us ways of making knowledge that do not necessarily feed into the ever-flowing stream of science, but also those practices that may constitute alternative forms of science. The global history of knowledge is the next step in this logical operation. But, in order to serve in that role, it also has to face certain challenges and do the hard work of rewriting the history of science. I use the word "challenge," mainly because I cannot see what anchors the history of science anymore. When I ask my colleagues, "What is the latest book you read that you think everyone else in the profession has also read?," the answer is usually Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston's *Objectivity*. While

⁹ Daston, "The History of Science."

it is a superlative work that amply deserves its central place, it was also published nearly twenty years ago. Physical sciences, once the core of our discipline, verges on extinction. History of medicine, represented obliquely by life sciences in the History of Science Society annual meeting as late as my graduate student years, has become a centerpiece of the profession. It is certain biopolitical regimes and not changes in cosmology or theoretical physics that define modernity nowadays. Technology, once anchored in the profession through the industrial revolution, may soon propose yet other thresholds of modernity based on computing and AI. These transformations in the way we tell history are direct outcomes of the flow of money, where medical research and AI take the lion's share of funding. Basic sciences, the kings of the Cold War American university, are retreating to a pedagogical role with funds that are dwarfed by exciting neoliberal ventures. So the big question for me is, where can we find the gush of funding and widespread enthusiasm for the global history of knowledge, especially in an era that many identify as an era of neoliberalism and of deglobalization? And, if the global history of knowledge cannot ride the wave of the market, will it then stand with and even define the democratic opposition?

Of course, there are reasons to be optimistic, perhaps more elsewhere than in the United States. If the field of the history of science continues on its trajectory of expansion and transformation, global history of knowledge has a bright future. Today, it is relatively easy to find historians with robust command of languages, geographies, and time periods who have an interest in the history of knowledge. Those of us who are riding the global wave would have been confined to our specific area studies in the past. Many scholars of my generation have been hired so that we may take part in a conversation like the present one. I think readers will be able to judge for themselves whether our contributions to a more general discussion ultimately help our understanding of knowledge, science, and the world.

Then comes the question of where and how this research is to be done, and by whom. I think what is best for this kind of research is collaboration—scholars who work on different geographies being able to come together to find and to discuss questions that can be asked and answered in common. Large, long-term grants given by funding bodies that care less about the uniqueness of natural science are likely more favorable than the American model, where intellectual individualism is key to one's career success in the humanities and the social sciences, and where grants usually last only a year. Such funding schemes may restore the original sense of contributing—of the *Beitrag*—to a larger project. And, in a Utopia, the global history of knowledge would train its own students who formulate their local research questions with other places in mind and who can fluently speak to people specializing in different fields.

Despite the real challenges and the utopian nature of my hopes, I think the very existence of this journal and of this forum suggests that the global history of knowledge is a serious and resilient contender for the future of the history

of science. The global history of knowledge can be good history and good philosophy. It can be an expansive platform for the best conversations and the pinnacle of inclusivity. It can provide the most integral approach to the basic human ability to know. I find it hard not to be excited by these prospects, no matter where the world seems to be going.

About the Author

Harun Küçük is Associate Professor of History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His first book, *Science without Leisure*, addresses the relationship between political economy and scientific practice in early modern Istanbul.

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