

SYMPOSIUM  
PROBLEMS AND METHODS IN GLOBAL THINKING



CONCEPTUAL FORMATION IN GLOBAL  
THINKING: DESK-BOUNDS,  
GLOBETROTTERS, AND PATHFINDERS.  
EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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# Conceptual formation in global thinking: desk-bounds, globetrotters, and pathfinders.

## Editor's Introduction

Corrado Fumagalli

### I

#### *Status quaestionis*

**I**n these days, nobody seriously doubts the usefulness of knowing more about historically marginalized traditions. Of course, nobody seriously doubts, either, that sometimes, instead of really engaging with distant others, philosophers fake or remain within their comfort zone to avoid having to give up some basic principle.

That global theorizing should relate to the whole world, either assuming some credible and sufficiently universal assumptions or encompassing a very large variety of worldviews across the planet, is a platitude. As obvious as it reads: if a theory addressing problems that are global in scope aims to be convincing outside its own tradition, it should be robust-enough to deal with the simple observation that, around the world, there are multiple systems of norms, rules and institutionalized normative orders. In reality, there are so many opinions about globalization, but most of the

philosophical work is bound to a single tradition. And, global normative theorizing remains particularly vulnerable to the critique of the dominance of the liberal canon (Flikschuh 2017). “A gap,” as Katrin Flikschuh writes, “seems to have opened up between our moral and political concepts and the global political reality we in fact face” (Flikschuh 2019).

Still, not all is lost. At a time in which even the development regime is more pluralized than even before, as “Western hegemony – material, ontological and ideational – is at last being eroded” by the growing visibility of new actors (Mawdsley 2015, 114),<sup>1</sup> an increasingly large number of people, with all sorts of motivations and methodologies, recognizes the impact of historically marginalized ideas and practices on normative theorising (von Vacano 2015). For instance, Lee Brown argues that through viewing conceptual lenses of others, scholars can realize a collective human experience and progress in interpersonal human development (Brown 2004). Fred Dallmayr (2004) believes that the inclusion of foreign traditions and texts is an opportunity to enable dialogue between peers. According to Roxanne Euben, “the project of comparative political theory introduces non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together, thus ensuring that ‘political theory’ is about human and not merely Western dilemmas.” (Euben 1999, 9). Even John Searle wonders whether it is possible (and under what terms) to progress toward a philosophical globalization (Searle 2008).

<sup>1</sup> Or, as Uchenna Okeja puts it in his contribution to this special issue, “the West has become provincialized, hence, its grand narratives about universal philosophical theories, which are all too often parochial, have lost their magic. In global philosophy, it is offered another opportunity to reimagine itself as an equal partner in dialogue without any supercilious pretensions.” (Okeja 2019, 106).

However, the urgency of the problem is so apparent that it can translate into an unreflective style of reasoning. It is important to promote universality which respects difference in global thinking. It is equally meaningful, as Dorothea Gädeke suggests in her contribution to this issue, to consider by what means we must do so (Gädeke 2019).<sup>2</sup> Across the various fields and sub-fields (to name a few: *Comparative Political Theory*, *Global Justice*, *Global Democratic Theory*, *Ideology Critique*, *History of Political Thought*, *Critical Theory*), the method of approaching distant others can make a significant difference in terms of concept formation and regeneration, especially at a time in which, to borrow again from Flikschuh, there is a sense of conceptual loss, as influential liberal arguments struggle to “broaden or change dominant terms of global debate.” (Flikschuh 2017, 5-6).

## II

### **Desk-bounds, globetrotters, and pathfinders**

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one, as Paul Ricoeur writes in his *History and Truth*, “we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an ‘other’ among *others*” (Ricoeur 2007, 278).

Assuming that some problems and theses may be culture relative, it is not surprising that the discovery of historically marginalized traditions may lead to a radical anything goes version of relativism. This is what “desk-bounds” think. A desk-bound shares preoccupations with the universalistic ambition of global theorising, but tends to adopt an orthodox postmodernism/poststructuralism. Such a relativistic stance does

<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see Allen 2016, chapter 1.

not really question the status of liberal theory, as it says that are many alternatives, each with its own justification. Such an anything goes perspectives also undermines the hope for social emancipation. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, “if all the different kinds of knowledge are equally valid as knowledge, every project of social transformation is equally valid, or likewise, equally invalid” (Santos 2016, 190).<sup>3</sup>

One may think that things may change with little efforts. This is the attitude of “globetrotters”. A philosophical globetrotter has a superficial knowledge of other traditions, often presupposes the identity of foreign traditions (she is however eager to object that there is nothing like a single and homogeneous liberalism!), and makes a tour of such traditions as useful sources of knowledge, whose inputs, she thinks, can be easily assimilated into her favourite paradigm.<sup>4</sup>

The promise is one of inclusion and equal weight. For instance, a globetrotter shows how historically marginalized traditions have something to say about problems at the centre of contemporary normative disputes. Canonical texts, as Brooke Ackerly argues with respect to Asian traditions, are taken to be repository of fresh ideas to be applied to our own problems (Ackerly 2005). Despite being instrumental to challenging the conceptual borders of liberal political theory, this approach keeps situating the barycentre of global theorising closer to the North with significant moral and philosophical costs. In this way, whether in the form of the self-appointed task of leading global emancipation or the tacit acceptance of epistemic authority, someone may seek inclusion of new ideas, but do so by means of those same pre-commitments

<sup>3</sup> Santos 2016, 190. See also, Chibber 2013.

<sup>4</sup> In the same way, a globetrotter may too easily borrow from Western thought to examine non-Western thought. On this issue, see Hassanzadeh 2015.

whose parochialism prompted expansion of the canon in the first place (Jenco 2007, 741).

By overestimating the contribution to conceptual formation of philosophical globetrotters, we give disproportionate credit to otherwise negligible scholarly efforts. Even if those works are far from having the usual level of sophistication, intellectual indulgence shields strange exercises in philosophical bricolage. Such a touristic approach *notices* other philosophies as “cultural curiosities” (Wiredu 1998, 26) and *ignores or pretends to ignore* that “cultural traditions are always a complex heritage, contradictory and heterogeneous, an open set of options, some of which will be actualized by any given generation” (Hountondji 1983, 161).

Adding new elements to amend the imperfections of the standard approach to global theorizing is necessary work; but the best way to deal with parochialism is a realistic and genuine understanding of how demanding re-orientation can be, and how complex and multi-layered otherwise neglected philosophies are. Yet, globetrotters conceptualize the South just as a source of surplus suggestions. Alike other pieces of chinoiserie, ideas from the South adorn erudite arguments with new exotic decorations, but nothing really changes in the way we conceive the world we live in, or in the way we evaluate and approach other philosophies.

The recognition of historically marginalized traditions may inspire a forward-looking reorientation of a given discourse. This is what “pathfinders” believe. Pathfinders treat the encounter with distant others as an opportunity to question one’s mode of understanding. What unites most of this scholarship is that it calls for an existential immersion in the unfamiliar. “The solution,” as Jenco puts it, “may be to engage the world and its knowledge, not just in the sense that we should acquire more information about it but also that we should recalibrate our expectations about what and how we learn, what counts as knowledge, and with whom and

for whom we might produce it” (Jenco 2015, 5). According to Farah Godrej, “a good comparative political theorist will have to alternate between internal immersion in the lived experience of the text, and an external stance of commentary and exegesis of the text”. Such an immersion may lead to a reflection on one’s position with respect to other claims and, perhaps, to shed light on conflicting imperatives, as Farah Godrej calls them (Godrej 2009, 138).

Pathfinders advocate openness to new observations and a re-negotiation of self-assigned positions of epistemic authority. Concerns here are on how the encounter with alternative traditions can qualitatively change the practice of global normative thinking. Unlike globetrotters, pathfinders believe that conceptual formation happens through particular engagement with others and their world. In *What is Orientation in Global Thinking? A Kantian Inquiry*, the subject of the symposium hosted in this special issue, Flikschuh argues that a reorientation of global thinking should begin with those altering encounters causing disjunctions between our universal aspirations and the opinions of other people, who think differently from us, but “whose thoughts and views may be accessible to us, if only we are prepared to try” (Flikschuh 2019).

The first-personal premise helps us to see that universality claims should not be conceived as “claims made from nowhere – they are always made from specific experiential standpoints” (Flikschuh 2019). There is something particularly important in the idea that the engagement with differently-situated knowledge offers guidance as on how we should think of our standpoint with respect to a range of ideas and practices of others who occupy different spaces at the same time. Through direct engagement with distant others, and by recognizing foreign values “as values that are or might have been possible for us,” one can question more or less explicit claims to intellectual and moral superiority. After all, “if we

can render,” as Flikschuh says, “Kant’s often very different way of thinking accessible to ourselves, we should be able to do the same with the other very different philosophical concerns of our geographically or culturally distant contemporaries” (Flikschuh 2017, 99).

### III

#### ***What is Orientation in Global Thinking? and its critics***

By concentrating on what it means for us to recognize others as sources of legitimate and authoritative normative prescriptions, pathfinders, like Katrin Flikschuh, show that disputes about the conceptual borders of global thinking raise complex questions about positionality in contemporary political theory. In other contexts, Adrian Little argues that comparative analyses demonstrates the importance of the relationships between “our *interpretation* of concepts and the kinds of political action or institutions that they enable” (Little 2018, 112). Jenco calls for a revision of our communities of argument that tend to affirm our embeddedness in Europeanized categories. She suggests that scholars “learn and produce research in other languages, transform their work to reflect the disciplinary standards of new audiences, and otherwise attempt to institutionally and politically transform the conditions under which they produce knowledge” (Jenco 2015, 17). Loubna El Amine argues that we should reconceptualize the ‘we’ of the history of political thought as ‘moderns’ rather than ‘Westerners’. On this view, a more global political theory “will treat texts and authors from the past two or three centuries as valuable reflections on our global predicament, and everything before as offering a sense of the alternatives we did not take” (El Amine 2016, 111). As all contributors to this special issue demonstrate, the dispute on positionality in political theory is far from being

settled. Arthur Ripstein resists the choice between first and third-person perspective, and, in his critique, stresses the relational aspect in the Kantian conception of right. According to Gädeke, Flikschuh asks the question of how to think globally from a liberal perspective, and, therefore continues with the us/them dichotomy. Olivier argues that human knowers are both concept-dependent knowers and concept-producing knowers. For Uchenna Okeja, global normative theorizing is better served if attention is directed at recognizing the importance and collective nature of the task of conceptual repair.

Against this backdrop, contributors to the special issue also pressure Flikschuh on more specific aspects of her argument. Gädeke challenges the appeal to seek intellectual engagement with others. Despite a persuasive critique to the exclusionary character of today's global justice debates, Flikschuh, she argues, remain centred on "an inwardly turned critical engagement with liberalism." Ripstein examines the Kantian grounds of *What is Orientation in Global Thinking*. He pressures on the issue of state entry, and he questions Flikschuh's claim that innate right is empirically non-instantiable. Olivier focuses on the issue of conceptual formation by arguing that only pure concepts that are genuinely shared across all contexts are proofs of a global orientation in thinking about justice. Uchenna Ojeja, by comparing and contrasting Flikschuh with Anna Stilz on Kant's duty of state entrance, reflects on injurious conceptual universalization and the urgency of tackling problems arising from universalization of concepts.

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