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Contents

Preface vii

Part I. A Framework for Debate
1. Approaches to Global Intellectual History 3
   SAMUEL MOYN AND ANDREW SARTORI

Part II. Alternative Options
2. Common Humanity and Cultural Difference on the Sedentary-Nomadic Frontier: Herodotus, Sima Qian, and Ibn Khaldun 33
   SIEP STUURMAN

3. Cosmopolitanism, Vernacularism, and Premodernity 59
   SHELDON POLLOCK

4. Joseph Banks's Intermediaries: Rethinking Global Cultural Exchange 81
   VANESSA SMITH

5. Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy 110
   ANDREW SARTORI
Part III. Concluding Reflections

12. How Global Do We Want Our Intellectual History to Be? 283
   FREDERICK COOPER

   SUDIPTA KAVIRAJ

Contributors 321
Index 325

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8

On the Nonglobalization of Ideas

SAMUEL MOYN

Suddenly, Haiti’s revolution has become a touchstone of contemporary thought, where a growing number of historians and theorists alike have aligned to right the wrong of narrative exclusion and to show that “Western” history has depended on subaltern actors to develop some of its own most cherished notions. The events in question in what was then called Saint-Domingue—thanks to which slavery was ended during the French Revolution in an uprising that terrified some and inspired others forever after—deserve attention after a long period of neglect. Much is at stake in how those events are interpreted, especially how concepts are said to have informed the political explosion.

In the past, Haiti may have changed the world, including American history. Its main role today, however, seems to be to inspire a new answer to how ideas can become global. Haiti, indeed, seems to be a window—or mirror—for a self-proclaimed globalizing age to seek the roots of large-scale conceptual transmission. Perhaps most prominently, Susan Buck-Morss tried to substantiate a parallel long ago constructed by David Brion Davis, by suggesting that G. W. F. Hegel’s master–slave dialectic depended on reading accounts of the Haitian uprising. But in this chapter, I begin with Haiti’s role in the new historiography of “human rights.”

Laurent Dubois offered in this literature what has proved a remarkably fertile claim that Caribbean blacks redeemed white principles,
thereby “universalizing” the notion of rights. “If we live in a world in which democracy is meant to exclude no one,” he wrote, “it is in no small part because of the actions of those slaves in Saint-Domingue who insisted that human rights were theirs too.” He then added in his impressive study of insurrection in Guadeloupe: “Developments in the Antilles outran the political imagination of the metropole in the imagination—and universalization—of rights.” Whatever this claim may have meant in Dubois’s own work, it has been taken by later historians, like Robin Blackburn and Lynn Hunt, to imply what I call a model of “truncation and fulfillment” in global intellectual history, a model that, in the Haitian case, takes the form of universalist truncation and subaltern fulfillment.

Even though it is framed in terms of rights, what makes this model worthy of attention is that it is a general one for conceptual spread across large spaces. On close inspection, though, the model turns out to be unpersuasive. Hunt’s approach has an explicit “logic of rights,” which runs from contemporary claims of citizenship by Jews and women through the Caribbean events. According to Hunt, once universal entitlements are declared, the pressure rises for remedying their original truncation. Although white Christian men may want to keep these entitlements for themselves, they are forced by the universalism of their own claim to extend them:

Human rights have an inner logic. As soon as a highly conceivable group came up for discussion [of entitlements], those in the same kind of category but located lower on the conceivable scale . . . would inevitably appear on the agenda. . . . In the workings of this logic, the supposedly metaphysical nature of [rights] proved to be a very positive asset.

Because formal universalism applies to everyone (for I assume it is the formal universalism of rights talk that matters), anyone can claim that he or she is excluded from its coverage. As they are humans too, Jews, women, and blacks can insist they are entitled to rights, thus universalizing the concept.

But how exactly does this logic of universalistic concepts work? It makes sense to consider this question from the complementary perspectives of conceptual content and historical agency. Starting with content, one might infer that the model of truncation and fulfillment posits that only universal principles are ones that can obey an inner “logic” that allows them to function externally as they do in and across the world. The presumption is that particularistic concepts are not limited or hypocritical in the same way. Following Dubois, Hunt insists that it is the very formal abstraction of truncated universals that allows them to travel—and to be seized from below—so unexpectedly. By contrast, particularistic concepts do not promise broad or even universal coverage in a similar manner and therefore do not invite the same moves.

It might be, of course, that nonuniversalistic concepts also globalize, but if they do, it is not according to the same logic. They presumably are more like commodities that spread according to a more random, and perhaps also less inspiring, set of mechanisms. It turns out that people like coffee, or Romantic symphonies, and disperse them from their point of origin and offer new variations of them around the world. These stories are new of considerable interest to people, as the success of much imitated books on the global percolations of various goods from cod to chocolate attests. But nobody claims that there is a logic of coffee or symphonies according to which they are somehow not what they really are until imported and made true to themselves. I find coffee fulfilling, but I do not fulfill it. In the current model, however, it is almost as if universals, and especially rights, have a destiny that depends on globalization to realize.

Now turn from content to agency. One interesting and potentially attractive feature of the model of truncation and fulfillment in global intellectual history is that it seems to offer a scheme in which apparently antagonistic elites and subalterns need each other. It is the (metropolitan) elites who announce universal principles, even if they keep them to themselves, and it is the (colonial) subalterns who become the fillers. As Blackburn emphasizes, the concepts do not work fully on their own: if the French Revolution “challenge[d] slavery,” it “was not because of the French Assembly’s resounding Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” in 1789, since neither the Assembly nor its successor, the Convention, moved on their own initiative to confront slavery. In other words, it took black action for white principles to rise above hypocrisy. Moreover, subaltern fulfillment is not simple mimicry but
elevates the principles above their originally bounded announcement in order to make them true for the first time. If it makes any sense, Dubois’s claim about the “universalization” of rights must mean this. Otherwise, what could it mean to universalize already universal principles? Clearly, they were universal in form from the beginning. But if they were “universalized” by unsuspected actors, it is presumably because they were not really universal until their genuine coverage was taken to its proper (or at least some further) extent. In this way, as such examples show, the model does intend to make room for human agency.

All the same, the role of these agents is that of realizing the concept’s already built-in potential before subaltern agency arrives. In the model of truncation and fulfillment, the historian supposes that the universals like rights are meant to have a greater relevance than they actually do initially, so that if they travel across the globe, it is according to a potential they had from the beginning. Thus, their globalization may fulfill them and depend completely on subaltern actors, but in doing so it realizes only what they already were. If they were not originally universal, they were at least universalizable. Hunt’s metaphor of “cascades”—the mechanism by which she says the logic of rights operates—is a good illustration of this commitment. The naturalistic metaphor makes it sound as if the concept were struggling to realize its potential, that humans are its servants, or even its beneficiaries. Put in another way, in the model of truncation and fulfillment, the globalization of a concept is, in significant part, autoglobalization.

All things considered, the model is a strikingly idealist one, and not least in its presentation of confused actors whose ostensible antagonism actually works to advance unintended designs, and in its considerable allocation of agency to the built-in destiny of a concept in itself. Like the old Weltgeist, rights may need to work in mysterious ways, but their globalization is already implicit in their announcement.

There is considerable evidence that this model is not simply a wish-fulfilling construction. After all, Hunt is right that in the revolutionary era, universalistic concepts had “cascade” effects as unintended actors claimed them. In one of the first efforts to construct a global intellectual history, others have tried to show that in the nineteenth century, liberal and democratic promises of emancipation worked in a similar way. But the Haitian example has a few obvious problems even on its own terms. It is not the only interpretation of the events available. In an embarrassing discovery for the model of truncation and fulfillment, Jeremy Popkin showed that between 1791 and 1793 there is no evidence of Haitian slaves invoking “the rights of man” or high principle at all in their maneuvering for concessions. As Malick Ghachem demonstrated, the uprising was based on legal entitlements of France’s Old Regime rather than a seizure from below of a new revolutionary universalism waiting to be realized.

Furthermore, the model unseats an older, Marxist interpretation of the events propounded by C. L. R. James. A Trotskyist, James’s view of droits de l’homme seems to have been as the “wordy” promises of “eloquent phrasemakers” who, driven by the true economic motor of history to “perorate,” are in the end willing to give up the aristocracy of the skin only at the point of the insurgent’s gun. Reviewing Blackburn’s recent book, Greg Grandin commented: “Blackburn does more than defend James’s argument that Haitians universalised European ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality. He extends it across all of the Americas.” But clearly, James would never have affirmed a logic of rights. Indeed, his attitude toward formal abstraction could not have been more different, and therefore he would have striven for something other than the model of universalist truncation and subaltern fulfillment.

What could such an alternative look like? Sticking to the concept of rights, let us move to another era, to seek the complexity that the exciting story of the Haitian insurrection may now make difficult to achieve, in part because it was so exceptional.

Contrary to the often repeated convention that in the era of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) the new idea “enjoyed enormous global attention,” it turns out that the United Nations provided the sole forum in which the phrase in its international bearing (and essentially new in the English language) had any relevance. There
was no self-styled “human rights movement” anywhere in the world. The moment after World War II, in other words, presents the puzzle of a concept eventually destined to be a worldwide giant beginning its life by seeming to be strangled in its crib. Long into the postwar era, if “human rights” meant what they now mean to anyone—principles beyond the nation-state to chasten, and the basis for nongovernmental transnational activism to name and shame—for some reason, they failed to appeal to many people in this sense.

The history of international human rights as a galvanizing idea was, in the beginning and for a very long time, a history of nonglobalization, especially compared with their circulation and resonance now. The example, then, challenges the model of truncated universals and subaltern fulfillment: Why did it not occur? It is not that the cascade failed, as in the French revolutionary bid of women to claim citizenship. As in the Haitian claims to freedom, Olympe de Gouges and other women during the 1790s look as though they tried to “fulfill” revolutionary universalism. In contrast, after World War II, almost no one experimented with the same subversive appropriation of universal human rights norms across large global spaces. The post–World War II era offers a scenario in which the cascade that one might count on instead failed to occur, like a river that refuses to flow even though the dam has been destroyed.

After World War II, there were good reasons that international human rights were not widely claimed. In my view, the most significant one is that the new concept came to the world along with an older concept that for a while did much better: the self-determination of peoples. In the Atlantic Charter of 1941, the document often taken as the origin of human rights, the Allies promised collective self-determination. But for British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, this was a vision of the liberation of Adolf Hitler’s empire, but not his empire, let alone empire as such. Eventually Churchill convinced U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, despite the latter’s dislike of formal empire, to share his interpretation. The concept of human rights, absent in the Atlantic Charter, surged after the war, just when the Allies were stepping back from self-determination. This replacement of one concept for another meant that some parts of the world saw in “human rights” not the enthralling global vision of contemporary historiography but something more like a consolation prize. Not surprisingly, the Atlantic Charter had enormous resonance across the world, including among African Americans identifying with the global anticolonialist cause. The Universal Declaration fell on comparatively deaf ears in contrast to this earlier striking “cascade.” (After 1950, indeed, self-determination became the first human right, even though the entire doctrine languished in the United Nations for decades.)

One way to approach the implications of these 1940s events for the model of truncation and fulfillment is to look at the same two dimensions as before: content and agency. If the nonglobalization of human rights is something the first model cannot explain on its own terms, then one must ask why—and whether it is a symptom of a larger theoretical mistake. It might even undercut the entire scheme. In offering a moment in which a logic of rights did not operate, suggesting that formal universalism need not by itself spark its potential from below, the case of the decolonizing or soon-to-be-decolonized world after 1945 might even point toward a different model of the globalization of concepts.

The first element of complexity absent from the model of truncation and fulfillment seems to be that there is often, probably always, more than one formal universalism available to spread. As Sheldon Pollock showed, universalism goes back a long way, with different versions of cosmopolitanism competing with one another across human history. After World War II, it was collective self-determination that, though it fell under Western eyes as human rights rose, succeeded in globalizing. Now it is possible to tell a story of truncation and fulfillment about self-determination, too, as Erez Manela did in a much noticed book. But my intent is not to retain the model for a different concept. In this particular historical moment, and perhaps in all such moments, it is impossible to isolate the globalization of one concept from the nonglobalization of another.

If fulfilling truncation is the right model at all, then perhaps the first questions are, Which truncation? Which fulfillment? In this era, the equally universalistic concept of self-determination, along with Marxism, did much better than human rights and was globalized instead. The victory of self-determination politics resulted in the greatest dissemination of sovereignty as a concept and a practice in world history.
and it created the very situation the human rights movement later set itself the task of qualifying or overcoming. (For its part, Marxism did so well in reaching global spaces that if forced to think of it in terms of the truncation and fulfillment of universalisms, one would have to acknowledge that its own critique of formalism and abstraction made it impossible to understand its own global travels and reinvention.) From the perspective of content, then, my example shows that it is never enough to think that the universalism—even the false or betrayed universalism—of a particular concept is a sufficient reason for its spread. By itself, truncation may not count for much.

Now consider agency again. From this vantage point, the obvious and considerable flaws in an idealistic model of the autoglobalization of concepts seem plain. Perhaps the history of universalistic (or even all) concepts depends on how rival human actors choose to deploy them, for good or for ill, and requires frameworks in which concepts have local and time-bound implications that may make them appealing in specific and concrete historical situations. Even if universalistic concepts function in a different way, their plurality in the abstract and specific historical meaning in concrete times and places means that their fate always depends first on which ones subaltern actors choose to deploy.

At times, Christianity—no less formally universal than human rights—has proved the appealing ideology of to “fulfill.” At other times, Marxism—no more formally universal than human rights are—has served. What, then, explains the spread of the concepts if nothing about their formal universalism by itself does? Presumably, the only persuasive explanation is the action of subaltern appropriation that selects and reinvents. Although surely it is true that the contents of alternative versions of universalism differ in crucial ways, it is also the case that subaltern selection and reinvention depend on a range of nonconceptual factors the historian cannot ignore.

Simply to pursue the example used so far, some of the important, if often implicit, questions to be answered about the meaning of rival concepts in specific historical moments are as follows: First, what are the prior associations of the concepts, and the formations of the actors who engage them? The history of twentieth-century anticolonialism suggests that the option to push for formal independence developed slowly amid the wreckage of false or failed promises of colonial reform. Although human rights were new, rights in imperial spaces were not. On one hand, they were easy to dismiss as inadequate, given their prior invocation as a gift of civilization. On the other hand, they also were open to appropriation before the 1940s, even if—in their old and new forms in the empire—they ultimately did not succeed in creating a robust enough option to stave off the bid for formal independence. The 1940s were a moment combining visionary experimentalism and genuine indecision, but no plausible account could leave out the prior history of the circulation of rival universalisms that led to various subaltern interpretations and appropriations.

Second, what are the different universalistic concepts’ associations with specific local and global forces? After all, different ones may seem more or less productive depending on the moment, for reasons that their universalism alone does not explain. Toussaint L’Ouverture invoked revolutionary citizenship (not “human rights” in their contemporary sense) not as an agent of the universal fulfilling itself across the globe but as a strategic actor with alternative choices in an imperial space. In the mid-twentieth century, very different subaltern internationalisms like Pan-Africanism meant a lot. Today, however, after a crisis of other languages of empowerment, many turn (or are compelled to turn) to diverse forms of Christian evangelicalism that are suddenly appealing to them—along with international human rights. If one factor in those affiliations is ideological, another may be instrumental. The general story, then, must be about the subaltern judgment of the specifics of power and possibility that alternative concepts offer.

Finally, it would be a mistake to ignore the already constituted political space that actors inherit and can reshape but that is rarely, and perhaps never, the globe simpliciter. This is especially true for colonial history, in which subalterns were in a dynamic relationship with imperial masters, but rarely with the globe generally.

In related comments on Haiti and beyond, Frederick Cooper emphasizes the political boundaries of the spaces in which concepts can travel. Although he invokes Haiti and rights, too, he actually points in a different direction than truncation and fulfillment, or at least registers the critical importance of fulfillment within a preconstituted political
space. “Could concepts of rights, human dignity, and participation be confined to national units?” Cooper asks:

The Haitian Revolution in the French empire, the combination of slave revolts and antislavery mobilization in the British empire, and the tensions between creole elites and peasants and slaves in the era of revolution in Spanish America all point to the possibility that politics in metropoles could not be neatly segregated from colonies.²⁰

If Toussaint and the French Revolution were in the same political space, or if (in another of Cooper’s favorite examples) early negritude intellectuals like Léopold Sédar Senghor at the end of World War II were most enthusiastic about a reimagined Union française in which the imperial space might serve rather than still obstruct emancipation and equality, it is because that space mattered as a medium for the arrogation of concepts. To Senghor, at this moment, rights within a reformed political structure seemed to promise more than either rights within a prospective autonomous state or a still mostly meaningless body of global human rights. Senghor, indeed, never referred to the latter so far as I can tell, despite his often very pronounced universalism: if he took the imperial space seriously for a while, he simultaneously ignored the United Nations and its “universal human rights.”

In other words, both Haitian and post–World War II cases underline the importance of political spaces, not the appeal of rights concepts by itself, in the strategic choices of subaltern actors. It is for this very reason that Cooper explicitly contrasts the logic of imperial spaces with one of “globalization.” Unlike Cooper, I do not rule out conceptual dissemination at the level of the globe, or at least approximating it more closely than any other spatial category available; but it is clear that the globe itself is not a purely geographical space but a constituted political and cultural space.²¹

These three dimensions helping determine the spread of a concept—its prior trajectory, the field of power and strategic choice, and available spaces of creative intervention—suggest that there is no obvious way to find in the content of some concept a decisive reason for the affiliation of historical actors. Agency is much more theirs, based on a reading of what the concept means (including the sorts of alliances it allows) in the history of affiliation with rights seems to be much more a matter of the political form or structure—state, region, empire, international organization, world community and all in both their actual and imaginable forms—in which they can be invoked with a difference. In a larger view, similarly complex moments have led to the choices for an alternative doctrine to rights (Christianity, Marxism, or whatever else).

If so, there is not only no immanent “logic” to rights but also no logic of any particular concept. They are tools and weapons for unexpected and better and worse uses. Of course, in this model, conceptual mediation and spread are inseparable from practical mobilization (including potential violence). Concepts inform such mobilization, but not in the way that “spirit,” in G. W. F. Hegel’s philosophy of history, is supposed to make passion blindly serve its cause. Instead of the cunning of reason, in other words, global intellectual history needs to be based on the cunning of action.

The risk of insisting on overdetermined conjunctures, and free agency within them, is that it ignores that conjunctures are always made of powerful forces and that agency is always constituted by those forces, not free in some ineffable sense or strategic on the basis of the unsheathed preferences of mythical “rational actors.” From one point of view, my proposal can skirt the dilemma of structure and agency, since no version of its resolution could permit a vision of global intellectual history in which concepts autoglobalize through the passive intermediation of human beings. The multiple pathways of any approach to social structure and its evolution—especially on a large geographical scale—prevent stories of truncation and fulfillment from being very compelling. Yet it is important to acknowledge that the critique of truncation and fulfillment, despite the latter’s prominence in contemporary accounts of rights and other globalizing themes (like economics and law), is not itself a theory of global intellectual history. Instead, it is compatible with many approaches to that emerging genre.²²

William Sewell’s state-of-the-art engagement with historical the-
Instead of a coercive theory of structure, Sewell emphasizes that structure is never just a constraint; it is a resource too. In his terms, structure is always “dual,” exerting causation and providing opportunity. In accounting for events, there is never just one structure. Drawing on and criticizing Marshall Sahlin’s, Sewell suggests that events do not happen spontaneously but are based on the conjuncture of structures. The plurality and collisions of these structures, occurring in endless new patterns, are what exerts whatever “structural determination” there is from case to case. As if such complications were not enough, Sewell also sticks to the “cultural turn” that has defined so much of humanities research in the past generation. Meaning is “thick” and requires interpretation to reconstruct the imaginative worlds of actors.

One sobering thought after reading Sewell is that the requirements of a currently plausible social theory make it extremely difficult to render large spatial (as well as longue durée) phenomena intelligible, precisely because accounts must deal with the duality and plurality of structures as well as with the way that cultural meaning inflects them. For the purposes of global intellectual history, my suggestion is that an acknowledgment of dual and plural structures permeated with cultural meaning also makes obvious that it is this complexity, rather than ineffable or unconstituted agency, that must be the starting point for understanding how individual actors choose to use concepts in some specific, conjunctural, and culturally laden moment.

Nonetheless, an approach like mine, emphasizing competing alternatives and situational appropriations, may seem to omit or sideline the way in which a “universal concept” like rights in general or human rights later “emerges in the modern epoch [and] transcends the boundaries of linguistic and cultural specificity to achieve global plausibility as a means of construing the world.” This is, at any rate, the way that Andrew Sartori describes culture, the specimen theme he studies in what is the most conceptually sophisticated attempt in recent historiography to write a global intellectual history. His description of it seems applicable to the problem of the globalization of rights and human rights, the example I have been considering here.

Sartori wants to force historians to confront the fact that certain universal concepts can be disseminated in versions that—whatever the problems and difficulties of their mediation and “translation” across linguistic and other barriers—are recognizably similar. Even in the case of a European concept, as Sartori observes, one must acknowledge its spread and not fear treating its secondary uses as derivative, for its appropriation itself is always as inventive as its earlier coinage. Out of a desire to avoid idealistic treatments of conceptual spread (as well as reductive materialistic approaches), Sartori suggests that the project of global intellectual history at its most ambitious must both describe and explain this breakthrough in modern times to global transmissibility, which only the fact that “some fundamental structures of social practice span the real and enormous differences that separate diverse and regional lifeworlds” could explain.

For Sartori, those structures are provided by the modern breakthrough to capitalism as well as by its evolving characteristics. Following Karl Marx and certain of his heirs, from Georg Lukács through Moishe Postone, Sartori claims that capitalism explains how universal concepts can afford the illusions of subjective autonomy (whether individual or collective) that interlock with the objective determination of social life. Thus it is no accident, since capitalism is modern, that only modernity is the forum for “the emergence of new, specifically modern concepts whose plausibility and power are at once real, persistent over time [and] globalizing in reach.”

Sartori’s intent to offer a model for global intellectual history beyond the details of his own case study is so provocative that it requires anyone interested in the future of the enterprise to engage it directly. And distressingly, given my preceding argument, Sartori’s approach might reveal that the model of truncation and fulfillment is preferable to the model of situational appropriation. After all, Sartori himself is committed to the relevance of modern universalistic concepts as well as to his own “logic” of their spread. As I showed, while rarely explicit in their theoretical commitments, those proposing truncation and fulfillment tend to apply it to specifically modern promises of emancipation, either rights by themselves or a package including dignity and citizenship. Similarly, this special regard for universalistic concepts is related in Sartori’s book to the fact that they play a unique ideological role in the modern, capitalistic circumstances that allow for their spread. In other words, their globalization very much obeys, for Sartori too, a
"logic." True, Sartori prefers to reclaim the universalizing spread of concepts like liberal rights and collectivist self-determination as ideological effects leading merely to the "liberation" of class relations. His account, nonetheless, is still one of necessarily modern universalisms and their globalizing cascades.

To be sure, Sartori breaks with the idealism of the model of truncation and fulfillment, on the grounds that the explanation for the cascades through which spreading occurs must be found in social practices whose basis is at least partly or, in the final instance, material. Similarly, there is little doubt that Sartori would avoid the notion of fulfillment, but not because he is averse to acknowledging transmission from the West to the rest. He is not impressed by the implicit sense of Western superiority that such a model offers, but he is also not concerned that acknowledging Western origins is somehow a strike against the originality of others. For Sartori, capitalism is a general sociohistorical phenomenon that, even if it appeared (along with various concepts) in one place first, is modern but not "Western." In any event, conceptual spread is an occasion for subaltern originality rather than simple derivation. Above all, Sartori’s globalization of concepts is an ideological effect of materially rooted domination, rather than a triumphant moment of idealistic "reconciliation."

Sartori’s presentation of universalistic concepts and their globalizing logic may escape my criticisms of truncation and fulfillment. I nevertheless worry that his model—with its intent to do justice to both the modernity and the spread of key concepts, in order to ally global intellectual history with a critical social theory—makes it difficult to understand the details of competition that my example of "human rights" in the postwar world is intended to demonstrate. It is true that Sartori’s narrative of the dissemination of culturalism to Bengal and beyond is premised on a succession from individualism to collectivist emancipation (including indigenism) that fits my story of the competition of personal "human rights" and collective self-determination very snuggly. Yet the details of that competition, especially the invention of "human rights" as a consolation prize and the situational preference for self-determination, appear to depend on factors that neither truncation and fulfillment nor "capitalist modernity" can easily explain. If Sartori’s response is that capitalism creates a framework for domestication and the resolution of key conflicts, leaving room for agents to maneuver on the ground and contingent accidents. In any case, like the early resolution of the competition in favor of self-determination, the postponed but eventual ascendance of human rights—against the background of the crisis of the developmentalist state around the world—is similarly hard to separate from the contingent details of global politics, including the appropriations of subalterns.

In fairness, Sartori is clear that his framework does not preclude the particularities of local and temporary circumstances, which he illustrates in his own case study, even if his agenda of recapturing the modernity and generality of globalizing conceptual transmission takes pride of place. But it is unclear the extent to which he is willing to incorporate not so much cultural difference as historical contingency in his model. If I have understood him correctly, Sartori might say that instead of dropping the modernizing and universalizing features of the model of truncation and fulfillment in favor of a picture of situated interpretation and appropriation, we should save those features for a new theory that respects or even incorporates the focus on context and agency that I have stressed. There remains the problem, however, of finding the right compromise between the "logic" of concepts and the contingencies of their spread. Resolving that problem seems difficult, but after Sartori’s book, it is perhaps unavoidable.

I am perfectly happy with that resolution, since it is compatible with the lesson that I have stressed: if there is to be a global concept history, it must put comparison and competition of potentially global concepts at its heart. Another crucial proviso is that comparisons are frequently made, and competition resolved, by situated actors in precise historical moments—and no logic of truncation and fulfillment controls either the actors or the moments. Above all, concepts do not spread one by one. They are not only bound up with larger political and cultural processes but also selected out of larger actual and possible sets of alternative concepts. This means that for every concept that does infiltrate a country and a social formation, there may be others that are viable and available. The actual choice among these is itself not an act of history in the grand scheme of things, but an opportunity to reconfigure the nature of the world in which one has been placed.
of ideas—even in modernity when remarkable episodes of transmission do indeed occur—is a critical and necessary part of any plausible global intellectual history.

Notes

6. Robin Blackburn, *American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation, and Human Rights* (New York: Verso, 2011), 174. Given the intention and subtitle of his book, it is surprising that Blackburn devotes almost no space to the proposition that "human rights" were on the mind of insurgent blacks in that era or, indeed, later.
7. For a more contemporary use of the metaphor, consider Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics* (New York: Norton, 2011), as if justice were not created or enacted but flowed through the world in somewhat the same way that communism was once viewed as spreading like dominoes falling. Compare Samuel Moyn, "Of Deserts and Promised Lands," *Nation*, March 19, 2012.
11. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, new ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 24, 116, 139. James thought that what mattered to Toussaint was that the "cascade" of citizenship did not happen by itself. Instead, it had to be forced through violence, and what these radicals insisted on was mainly their right to be masters of their fate. The same was true in twentieth-century history.


22. Ibid., chap. 4.

23. For several years, political scientists have been addressing these topics under the heading of "norm diffusion." See, for example, Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," International Organization 58, no. 2 (2004): 239-75; and for the theorizing as applied to criminal accountability protocols, see Sikkink, Justice Cascade.


25. Andrew Sartori, Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 47.

26. Ibid., 19, and the literature on translation cited on p. 241, n. 76.

27. Ibid., 18; compare p. 48 for a similar formulation.

28. Ibid., 63.

29. Liberalism and culturalism, though generally emerging and working in historical succession, were, Sartori says, "both . . . conceptions of subjective autonomy [that] proceed from the historically specific structures of capitalist society [and] must both be understood in terms of an antinomy internal to the logic of capitalist social forms," ibid., 51. Thus, Sartori's story is one about competition rather than the mere sequence of conceptual schemes.

30. See, for example, Sartori, Bengal in Global Concept History, 20:

While I do insist on a radical epochal break from the forms of non-modern social relations that characterized premodern South Asia, I do so to emphasize the historical specificity of global social structures into which these older institutions have come, in an inevitably transformed manner, to be embedded, and not to negate the concrete continuities of particular social practices.