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Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century

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The nascent discipline of global intellectual history must confront a fundamental question: What makes the global? What defines the scale and shape of this history’s globe, and is it dealing with one globe or several? Until it has resolved this problem of definition, global intellectual history is likely to remain a series of “big-frame” national histories—how intellectuals in one country grappled with ideas from elsewhere—or a collection of comparative studies that recapitulate national frames as they try to overcome them. We can begin to answer the question by investigating specific examples of concepts moving in the world (not between nations). By examining the patterns of their movement in a given period, the conditions that made their movement possible, and the consequences of the movement for the concepts themselves, we can begin to understand the scale and organization of intellectual fields that are “global” in historically specific terms, defined by and defining particular moments. With such a working understanding, we can start to develop methods of research. This chapter is meant to explore the shape of one transnational intellectual field in the nineteenth century and to propose methods that may apply to other parts of the enterprise of global intellectual history. My example is the intellectual field defined by the universalization of concepts from European social thought in the nineteenth century. We can see the outlines of the field by tracing the ways in which originally European ideas such as “civilization” and “society” reached Japan during the Meiji period (1868–1912).

My argument is that as concepts moved around the world, they experienced multiple mediations, including translation into other languages and mass reproduction in the form of textbooks and publications for popular audiences. The resulting process of abstraction attenuated the concepts' connection to their originators and to the European historical examples from which they were derived. Mediation and abstraction allowed the “universalization” of concepts in a specific sense: the use of a concept as if it were valid in all places at all times. To avoid confusion, I want to make clear that I am not talking about the universality of concepts, a quality presumed to inhere in their meaning. Rather, I am talking about a universalization that can be observed in a concept's use. (I will address universality later.) In the nineteenth century the movement, circulation, or “travel” of concepts was essential to their universalization. Travel thus created the transnational intellectual field that should be the proper object of a global intellectual history for the nineteenth century. The extent of intellectual circulation by the end of the century may show that the scale of this intellectual field finally became coextensive with the geographical globe, to the disadvantage of other intellectual “worlds” defined by distinct processes of universalization. Investigating this and other issues requires research into the technological, political, and economic conditions underlying the field’s emergence; the processes of mediation through which concepts spread; and the socially situated uses to which they were put. In trying to define and study a transnational intellectual field, the project I propose differs from recent fruitful studies of conceptual transfer, translation, and “crossed history.” Each of these tends simply to multiply the frame of national history in positing departures and arrivals, source and target languages, or the distinct actors of intercrossings. As I will note along the way, “nation” was one idea universalized during the nineteenth century. The political consequences are part of the history of conceptual universalization. Allowing national frames to define the method of global intellectual history, however, would install an intellectual and political blind spot in the enterprise just as it is being founded.
The Era of Civilization and Enlightenment

The period in Japan beginning in the early 1870s, shortly after the establishment of a new state in 1868, and extending into the middle of the 1880s is frequently called the era of “civilization and enlightenment” (bunmei kaika). The period saw intensive study of the institutions, technology, and thought of European countries, primarily those of Britain, France, and Germany, and the United States. Following the example set in the 1850s and 1860s by the Tokugawa state and some of the individual domains of that period, the new government organized study missions to North America and Europe that investigated a host of aspects of life in these regions, from systems of government to newspapers and education. The Meiji government also sent students to study in European and U.S. universities. In addition, it enacted a series of reforms, many modeled on institutions and practices observed abroad, including the introduction of a military draft, public schools and institutes of higher learning, and new legal codes.

The era is remarkable for the number of new concepts that appeared. With the government promoting the study of foreign languages, a wide range of European and North American works on philosophy, law, and political economy were translated into Japanese, including Montesquieu’s L’esprit des lois (1748, trans. 1874), the American Declaration of Independence (1776, trans. 1866), Johann Bluntschli’s Allgemeines Staatsrecht (1851, trans. 1872), and John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty (1859, trans. 1872). Translation produced a steady flow of neologisms, from names for technologies such as the telegraph (denpō) to designations for abstract concepts like “society” (ultimately translated as shakai), which posed a particular challenge that I will discuss later. The phrase bunmei kaika joined two such words, each a translation of the English civilization and its cognates in other European languages.5 The duplication in the Japanese phrase, which is lost in the customary reverse translation as “civilization and enlightenment,” alerts us that the meaning of civilization was in dispute. Bunmei, moreover, is written with characters signifying “letter(s)” and “brightness” (文明), and kaika with characters signifying “opening” and “change” (開化). The two translations recall an ambiguity in the concept of civilization as it emerged in France and Britain, as to whether civilization was a condition or a process. Translation, then, was a part of debates in the 1870s and 1880s over the nature of civilization and how to accomplish it.

Fukuzawa Yukichi, one of the era’s most important intellectuals, defined civilization in his book Outline of a Theory of Civilization (Bunmeiron no gairyaku, 1875) as not a state of material comfort but a process that included the moderation of human sentiment, the increase of knowledge, and “the tendency toward successive improvement of human intercourse for the better.”6 Described in this way, the value of civilization would seem self-evident, but Fukuzawa and other reformers inside and outside the government commonly distinguished between civilization as end and means. In Outline of a Theory of Civilization, Fukuzawa disparages Japan in comparison to Europe but argues that European civilization is merely the most advanced example of civilization at present and thus a model to follow rather than an end in itself.7 “The independence of the country is the goal,” he declared, “and the civilization of the nation [kokumin] is the means to reach that goal.”8 Remarks like these reveal the instrumental orientation of much civilization and enlightenment thought. The orientation supported a tutelary attitude toward the inhabitants of the Japanese islands: for Japan to survive, the argument went, the people had to be civilized. There were disputes over how to reach this end, with some, like Fukuzawa, stressing the transformation of mentalities and others focusing on material changes, but all agreeing that the people would be civilized whether or not they desired it. Many of the reforms that resulted, from changes in diet and hairstyles to changes in religiosity and the organization of labor and leisure, were carried out with such disregard for existing patterns of life that Takashi Fujitani likens them to a “cultural terror.”9

Fukuzawa’s view of civilization as the means to achieve independence was not up-by-the-bootstraps idealism. The treaties that the Tokugawa government signed with the United States and the European empires in the 1850s and 1860s limited Japanese sovereignty so long as standards of civilization did not prevail within its borders. Revising the treaties, with their much resented privileges of extraterritoriality, depended on demonstrating that Japan had become a civilized country as defined by European international law. The Meiji government’s
domestic policy of civilizing the people and its diplomatic policy of
treaty revision thus operated with the same logic and goal. The con-
joint strategy reflected the prescriptive force of the late-nineteenth-
century system of states and empires: the only way out of semicolonial
domination was to establish a sovereign state ruling a civilized nation.
Even having come this far, however, we can recognize that concepts
like state and nation gained their normative power through a transna-
tional intellectual field that grew, among other ways, through the work
of translation. The history of this field cannot be grasped if we confuse
historical phenomena like the nation-form with analytical categories.

Many of the new institutions and social practices that appeared in
this period endured. It therefore has a privileged place in historical
writing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japan. To sketch out the
most common tendencies in historiography since the end of the Asia
Pacific War: In the 1950s and 1960s, modernists in Japan and modern-
ization theorists abroad treated the era of civilization and enlighten-
ment as the political, economic, and intellectual beginning of the
modern in Japan. English-speaking historians presented the period
as Japan's Enlightenment, analogous to a period in Atlantic intellec-
tual history that they associated with the establishment of democratic
capitalism. By this account, the example of civilization and enlighten-
ment could provide the foundation for a similar transformation of
Japan and its realignment as an ally in the Cold War. Historians
in Japan during the same period did not take as optimistic a view of
the early Meiji period. Liberals such as Maruyama Masao, a scholar
of political thought, turned to the era to ask what had gone wrong in
Japan. Scholars like Maruyama, often referred to as postwar modern-
ists, used the Enlightenment in Atlantic history as the basis for nega-
tive comparisons of Japan with Europe. That is, the era of civilization
and enlightenment was the origin of a distorted intellectual and politi-
cal modernity in Japan that led to fascism and a disastrous war. In
more hopeful moments, modernists wondered whether it might also
offer the foundation for a true, European-style modernity, but they did
not think that establishing it in Japan would be as simple as modern-
ization historiography suggested.

Modernization and modernist historiography, each tending to focus
on the state and its allied reformers, were challenged in the 1960s
and 1970s by a variety of social history known as minshūshi, "people's
history," which examined the consequences of Meiji-era reforms for
farmers, laborers, and other non-elite groups. Irokawa Daikichi and
other scholars of people's history also searched the era for precedents
for a progressive Japanese democracy. In the late 1980s and 1990s,
the relatively simple view of the "people" in people's history came
under scrutiny in Japan and the United States as historians reevalu-
ated the era of civilization and enlightenment as the period in which
a Japanese national identity was solidified and bound to the state.
This historiographical turn was a critical revision of people's history
among Japanese historians, and it finally put an end to histories of
modernization in English-language scholarship, which had staggered
on for many years. Because such reevaluations of the period required
a resolute historicization of ideas of nation and nationality, they even-
tually reinvigorated the study of the era's intellectual history. Some of
the most interesting recent work on the period focuses on the history
of translation and the adoption of such concepts as state, sovereignty,
and rights, so that it now is common to speak of the "translation cul-
ture" (hon'yaku bunka) of the early Meiji period.

A few observations on these trends in historiography, thinking par-
ticularly about intellectual history: First, the idea of the early Meiji
period as the inception of the modern remains strong. Even historians
who argue that some of the practices and institutions that appeared
in the Meiji period have pre-Meiji roots view the 1870s and 1880s as a
decisive transformation. Second, the paradigm of influence and recep-
tion seems almost unmovable. The historiography of the 1950s and
1960s presented the intellectual history of early Meiji as the adoption
of "Western" ideas. The more recent work on translation and conceptu-
tual history takes a more sophisticated view of the process, but the
focus on transfer into Japan is basically unchanged. Both the para-
digm of reception and the emphasis on the Meiji period as a begin-
ning, however, tend to obscure the histories outside Japan of the concepts
in question. Many of the key concepts dated only to the seventeenth
and eighteenth century in Europe. As concepts they were thoroughly
historical, not "Western." The stress on reception, moreover, often
overlooks the politics behind the use of concepts such as civilization
and rights. Recent work on the intellectual history of civilization and
French monarchy in Histoire générale de la civilisation en Europe (1828). Guizot contended that a liberal monarchy that avoided the “excesses” of the Revolution but preserved its reforms was the telos of European history. Guizot’s arguments on the evolution of political institutions gained wide attention (Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill read him with interest). Four translations of Guizot’s book appeared in Britain between 1837 and 1846. One of two translations from 1837 was published in the United States in 1840 and then released with notes by Caleb Sprague Henry, a professor of philosophy and history in New York. Fukuzawa drew on Guizot in Outline of a Theory of Civilization to establish that civilization was a historical stage that Japan could reach. Fukuzawa, however, read Henry’s annotated edition of a British translation. The path of ideas from Ferguson to Fukuzawa begins in Scotland and passes geographically through France, England, and the United States before reaching Japan, with successive translations, annotations, and “repurposings” along the way.

The European historical novel, another important means of describing society and its transformations, also had a far-flung career. Novels like Walter Scott’s Waverly (1814), which led the rise of the genre, are commonly taken as the sign of changes in historical consciousness during the nineteenth century, including a growing opinion that social forms evolved in ways that could not be resisted. Whereas Guizot gave a history to civilization, Scott made one for the nation—potentially any nation, once the genre was established. He won followers in Europe, such as Alexandre Dumas père in France, and around the world. In the United States, James Fenimore Cooper used Scott’s methods to describe the evolution of colonies into a nation, and writers such as José de Alencar followed Cooper’s example to create “foundational fictions” in South and Central America. Scott’s descriptions of the relationship of the British periphery to England had a profound effect on fiction in Britain’s overseas periphery, its settler colonies. The encounter of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee with the work of Scott and his contemporary Edward Bulwer-Lytton helped transform Indian fiction. Scott and Bulwer-Lytton were translated into Japanese in the 1880s, as writers were looking for new techniques to describe a rapidly changing society. Another contribution came through translations via English of French historical novelists such as Dumas.
The circulation of liberal political economy, whose theory and rhetoric contributed to new descriptions of society and its evolution, was similarly complex. The misnamed founder of liberal economics, Adam Smith, innovated through summary in _The Wealth of Nations_ (1776), by drawing together currents of thought in England, Scotland, and the European continent, including those of the French Physiocrats. Jean Baptiste Say, who considered himself an interpreter of Smith despite his own contributions to the field, helped reintroduce these ideas in France. In turn, Say’s _Traité d’économie politique_ (1803) was translated in Britain in 1821. Along with editions of Smith and David Ricardo, the translation spurred the popularization of liberal theory in the United States and became a college standard. The first course in liberal economics offered in Japan—incidentally taught by Fukuzawa Yukichi—used an American textbook marked by Say’s work, Francis Wayland’s _Elements of Political Economy_ (1837). The first works of liberal theory published in Japanese also were translations of books meant for nonspecialists: John Hill Burton’s _Political Economy for Use in Schools and for Private Instruction_ (1852), roughly half of which Fukuzawa included in _Conditions in the West_ (Seiyō jijō, 1867), and William Ellis’s _Outlines of Social Economy_ (1846), translated by Kanda Takahira as _Elementary Economics_ (Keizai shōgaku, 1867). The latter was a double translation from a Dutch edition by Simon Vissering, Kanda’s teacher at Leiden University.

Reproduction, Mediation, Abstraction

These examples offer rich material for studies of “translingual practice” in the manner of Lydia Liu and the collection _Words in Motion_. One case would be the translation of the English word “society” and related words in other European languages (société, Sozialität, etc.). Crafting a Japanese equivalent for “society” was difficult because no word existed to signify a group whose members were formally equal but whose scale extended beyond acquaintances. The lexicographer Saitō Tsuyoshi found that writers tried out more than forty words and phrases between the 1790s and 1880s. The compound _shakai_, which ultimately prevailed, was originally coined in Chinese (shehuì) as a translation for the Dutch _klooster_ (“cloister” or “monastery” in English). It entered Japanese in 1826 with this meaning and was not clearly used as a translation for “society” until 1875, finally becoming the generally accepted translation after 1877. Other translations continued to circulate until the late 1880s. It would be possible, following Liu, to treat “society”/_shakai_ and other negotiated translations as signifiers for heterolinguistic signs, that is, signs whose production requires more than one language. In light of its importance in treaty revision, “civilization”/_bunmei_ could be seen as what Liu calls a “super-sign,” a variety of heterolinguistic sign that articulates relations of imperial domination through a meaning established by treaty. According to this approach, the history of civilization and enlightenment thought in Japan would be the history of heterolinguistic signs.

Translation-focused studies are troubled, however, by several problems. Most have difficulty deciding on the difference between a word and a concept. Clearly these are not identical, but the slippage means that Liu’s recent work and many of the stimulating essays in _Words in Motion_ are effectively conceptual history, despite the ostensible focus on words and translation. More gravely, translation studies tend toward a binary logic exemplified by Liu’s focus on linguistic transactions between English and Chinese to establish equivalents for terms such as the English “right.” Like “society,” “right” was a heterolinguisitc sign (or, better, a concept with signifiers in several languages) well before the British and Chinese empires clashed. Negotiations over a Chinese equivalent continued an already transnational history that constrained the potential meanings of both “right” and its eventual equivalent, _quanzhì_. Liu gestures toward the longer history, but the emphasis on creation of equivalents posits an essential difference between a concept’s national history—starting with the struggle to find an equivalent—and what would be, from this perspective, its extranational prehistory. Aside from resurrecting the national frames they hope to escape (a politically hazardous tendency when dealing with the age of nationalism), national or international histories of translation lose sight of the source of the normative power of concepts in circulation in the nineteenth century, which was not the creation of equivalents, or the concepts’ “Western” origin, but the assertion that they applied in all places at all times. The key question for any history of concepts in circulation must be how they were universalized.
We cannot understand universalization simply by studying translation, reception, or appropriation. There are essential lessons to learn from how and why ideas traveled the world at specific moments. The histories of travel I offered earlier provide interesting examples. First, there appears to be a lot of serendipity, even chance, in how ideas traveled. If a certain book fell into the hands of someone with certain linguistic skills, it might be translated. The more ubiquitous the book was, the more likely this would happen. Thus Burton’s *Political Economy* and Ellis’s *Outlines of Social Economy*, which were in the domain of political economy but not especially important, were translated into Japanese and had an important influence. As the cases of Burton and Ellis also suggest, many of the works through which concepts such as civilization and society traveled belonged to the vulgate of ideas. They were textbooks or books written for popular audiences. Thus while the ideas of Smith, Ricardo, and other key figures in political economy eventually made it to Japan, they passed through one or several mediations involving other writers. Translation—another kind of mediation—also was part of the movement of ideas. But this was truly a matter of movement, not just the creation of equivalents, because works often circulated in languages other than the one in which they were first written. (Recall that Fukuzawa read Guizot in a British translation annotated by a professor in the United States.) For Japan as for many countries, English was the most important language of translation; anything translated into English was likely to get more attention. Finally, in the early Meiji period there seems to have been no sense that one should find the original source of an idea. More important was its usefulness in responding to the dire geopolitical situation.

These observations, all concerning how concepts arrived in Japan, have to be tempered by one more that turns the others on their heads (or puts them upright). The fact that concepts such as civilization traveled so widely, through so many different circuits, that they were repeatedly picked up, translated, and used by authors without acknowledgment of the source—if they knew the source—shows that the concepts were recognizable in places far from their country or region of origin. That writers treated signifiers from different languages as if they were equivalents, regardless of whether languages are ultimately incommensurable, is further proof. In light of the transnational currency of concepts like society, what seems to be a large degree of contingency in which works became influential simply indicates the concepts were available in any number of works by this time. The fact that many of the concepts arrived in mediated form—through the intellectual vulgate, through translation—means it was not necessary to go to the origin to get the concepts, which by this time may have been more recognizable in their popularized than in their original forms anyway. Such recognizability came from the reproduction of concepts, not their original production. And as much as geopolitics inflected the creation of equivalents—a key part of the circulation of ideas—the readiness with which equivalents were accepted shows that these concepts’ lingering associations with particular parts of the globe did not leave them looking any less universal.

Several material factors underlay the patterns of circulation of European concepts in the nineteenth century. Changes in technologies of publishing and transportation, particularly the rotary press and steam navigation, made the circulation of printed matter cheaper and faster. Increases in literacy in western and central Europe and North America supported the rise of publishers offering popularizing books in large print runs. (This was the specialty of one of Guizot’s British publishers, the Edinburgh firm of William and Robert Chambers, which also published Burton’s introduction to political economy.) The large runs may have been meant for domestic markets but nonetheless injected more physical volumes into international circuits. European imperialism also affected the movement of concepts outside Europe. The transportation channels established by the European empires facilitated the physical circulation of works, while the familiarity of imperial languages such as French and English made them accessible, in translation if not in the original languages. Students trained at European or North American universities, such as Kanda, or at missionary-founded local colleges, introduced concepts from European thought to non-European intellectual milieus. Colonial governance made some European ideas, such as those clustered around the concept of “population,” a part of social practice. Similar reorganizations of governmentality could be found in noncolonized areas, as the example of Meiji Japan shows. In both cases, intellectuals often regarded
European ideas as technologies to block further imperial incursion, even as they tried to distinguish the ideas from imperialism's ideological apparatus.27

These material factors distinguish the era when conceptual universalization as I have defined it could take place. The process of universalization that can be seen in the movement of ideas such as society and civilization from Europe to Japan was grounded in print mass-production and circuits of communication facilitated by imperialism. More broadly, it was grounded in capitalism and imperialism in their nineteenth-century forms. The shift from the free-trade imperialism of the middle of the century to the formal colonization of its end facilitated universalization by more tightly linking distant parts of the world to Europe and, in the 1890s, to the United States. (While my examples are limited to the nineteenth century, we can therefore extrapolate that this mode of universalization probably dominated until the era of decolonization.) I have stressed the importance of reproduction over original production, but it should be clear that this historically specific process of universalization included engagement and revision, not simple repetition, and did not take place without antagonists such as the Neo-Confucian social thought that had been hegemonic in Japan since the early seventeenth century.

The paradigm of “intercrossing” from the work of Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann allows us to describe the mode of engagement under these historical conditions with more precision. Werner and Zimmermann use intercrossing to describe the ways that two or more concepts or bodies of thought are modified through mutual contact. As opposed to the linear trajectories of influence posited by studies of conceptual transfer, Werner and Zimmermann stress that contact affects all “parties” in an exchange. Nonetheless, the resulting transformations may be asymmetrical: one side may be affected differently and to a greater extent than the other.28 Outside the Atlantic world, asymmetrical interaction with Europe was the norm in the nineteenth century. When Neo-Confucian views of governance and post-Enlightenment social thought crossed in Meiji Japan, for example, Neo-Confucianism emerged greatly diminished, as an “Oriental” particularism, even though not long ago it had been the source of Enlightenment adulation.

It should now be possible to theorize, inductively, the process of conceptual universalization characteristic of the nineteenth century and the role that the travel of concepts played in it. As concepts like society and civilization circulated, their connection to their original source was attenuated. Scottish ideas of political economy, for example, reached Japan after many mediations along multiple paths. Smith’s ideas (themselves a synthesis) moved through Say to Wayland and thereby to Japan, where Fukuzawa used Wayland’s textbook in his course on economics. The same constellation of ideas reached Japan along different paths, such as Kanda’s translation of Ellis (based on a Dutch translation of the English original) and Fukuzawa’s translation of Burton. As concepts moved further away from their origin, along multiple paths, the first source may have become irrelevant because it was no longer the means through which people encountered the concepts. At the same time, propositions first derived from examples in European history, such as Guizot’s view that liberal monarchies were the telos of the evolution of civilization in Europe, became increasingly disconnected from those examples as they were used to understand human communities in other parts of the world. The result was a process of abstraction through which a concept such as civilization, originally a description of human life in Europe, became “civilization in general.” The process could be sped up by efforts to disengage the generality of concepts from the exemplarity of Europe, as when Fukuzawa argued in Outline of a Theory of Civilization that Europe was only the most advanced example of civilization, not civilization per se. Intercrossings with competing views of the order of human relations whose result was asymmetrical served the process of abstraction: the “disqualification” of competing ideas as regional particularisms compounded European ideas’ appearance of generality. As a consequence, it became possible to use them as if they applied to all human communities in all places and all times. In a phrase, they were universalized.29

Universalization and Particularization

To understand conceptual universalization, we have to take what is likely an unpopular step back from the view of universality as an
inherent quality and universalization as the recognition or Hegelian realization of such universality. By reconsidering what universalization consists of, whether it is historically possible for all concepts, and indeed whether the process is the same for all concepts that are universalized, it may be possible to put universalism on firmer ground.

In the transnational history of nineteenth-century social thought, the universality of concepts concerning human aggregations was an effect of how they were used, not of their "meaning." The quality of universality, moreover, emerged as concepts were used outside their point of origin. For a thinker in France to regard the history of European civilization as the model of the history of the world may have been just banal ethnocentrism. When an intellectual in Japan used a concept abstracted from European examples to appraise the history of Japan and propose social policy to suit, the concept had gained an entirely different breadth of application. For historians, the ultimate measure of the universality of an idea must be its incorporation into social practice in places far from its origin, including not only behavior in the world of ideas but also modes of governance and, potentially, resistance.

The role of abstraction in the process of universalization observable in the nineteenth century suggests an operative definition for distinguishing between concepts that are universalizable and those that are nonuniversalizable at a given moment: a nonuniversalizable concept is one that cannot be abstracted without a loss of meaning too great for the process of transformation I have described to take place. By this measure, however, nonuniversalizability would be a historically specific quality subject to the same contextual factors affecting universalization. Universality thus had a counterpart in particularity, understood not as an inherent quality but as an outcome: particularization. For several centuries the concept of "way" (Chinese dao, Japanese dō), important to many strands of thought in East Asia, including governance, has been particularized as a matter of "Eastern religion." One wonders, however, if its status may change in a new economic and political environment.

I should be clear: that such concepts were accepted as universal does not mean they were innocent. The more universal they seemed, the more politically potent they could be. As Fukuzawa's habit of comparing Japan negatively with Europe suggests, universality as I am defining it, as a consequence of use, is essentially normative. In the era of civilization and enlightenment, concepts such as civilization and society carried strong assertions about the form that human relations in Japan should take, in fact had to take. The force of such assertions depended on the putative universality of the concepts: if "civilization" could be used as if it were a stage in the development of all societies, then Fukuzawa could say that the populace of Japan must be civilized from above if it would not civilize itself. The normative quality of universality-in-use was not limited to policies meant to protect the Japanese state's sovereignty. Beginning in the 1870s the state exploited the universality of the corpus of international law to transform its relations with China and Korea and ultimately to legitimate its colonization and "reform" of the latter. Domestically and internationally, the universalized concept of civilization was a means to protect and aggrandize the state.

The example of the Japanese state's actions in East Asia contradicts the view that the dissemination of concepts from European social thought was intellectual imperialism that directly benefited European and, by the 1890s, U.S. empires. The universalization of concepts such as civilization, right, and sovereignty strengthened these empires' claims that colonization was legal and beneficial. Yet the support did not arrive directly as proof of the superiority of European civilization, for example. Rather, it was mediated by the concepts' universality-in-use and ultimately by the transnational—not "Western"—intellectual field created by the circulation of works and ideas. The universalization of these concepts legitimated the organization of the globe as a system of sovereign states and colonial dependencies, strengthening the position of any empire in it. Theodore Roosevelt's endorsement of Japan's domination of Korea, on the grounds that Japan "played the game of civilized mankind," is an example. In the Taft-Katsura Agreement (1905), the United States pledged not to interfere in Korea in exchange for a free hand colonizing the Philippines. The agreement among imperial powers on the universality of civilized right (reprised later in 1905 in the Second Anglo-Japanese Alliance, concerning Korea, India, and Burma) simultaneously particularized colonial objections.
From Generalizing to Relativizing Universalisms

It is now common to note that European universalism made anticolonial movements possible. As before, we should recognize that the universalization of concepts through use, not an inherent universality "turned against hypocrisy," allowed such resistance. Note also that often the concepts supporting anticolonialism were subtly different from those that legitimated colonization. As observed earlier, many key concepts from European social thought were used as if they were valid in any situation. Once universalized, "civilization" was a measure that could be applied to any human community. We could say that such concepts were used in a "generalizing" manner established during the Enlightenment.

Other concepts, however, were universalized in a different way. In these cases the concept was used as if it were universally valid as a category but described a phenomenon that was essentially different in every iteration. An example is "culture" (Kultur) as it was used from the nineteenth century onward, beginning in Germany: every place "had" a culture, but every culture was different. Moreover, every culture was the equal of any other in and because of its difference. In contrast to generalizing uses, we could say that such concepts were used in a "relativizing" fashion: the universality of the category was inseparable from the difference of all possible instances from one another. Concepts used in generalizing and relativizing ways often competed. As Brett Bowden shows, Kultur was an antagonistic response to "civilization." In the 1890s a group of Japanese intellectuals known as the Seikyōsha used relativizing logic to defend the country's "national culture" (kokumin bunka) against generalizing uses of civilization by domestic reformers and Japan's treaty partners, who demanded that the country meet the standard of civilization to regain full sovereignty. The Seikyōsha writers likened Japan to Germany in its struggle for cultural independence from France after the Napoleonic wars, citing Johann Gottlieb Fichte and other champions of German culture.

Nineteenth-century intellectual history is riddled with similar pairs of universalized concepts used in generalizing and relativizing manners. Among the most important examples is "state" versus "nation": in international law, each state was categorically identical; in nationalist thought all nations were the same in that each differed from all the others. Both generalizing and relativizing universalistic concepts are normative, but the latter are paradoxically so, because they assert difference on normative grounds. Again, the distinction can be observed in use: state and right underwrote the "generalizing universalism" of international law; nation and culture, the "relativizing universalism" of movements for national self-determination and the protection of cultural difference. In the nineteenth century, the two types were universalized through the same mechanisms; they existed in the same historically specific intellectual field.

The spread of concepts universalized through relativizing uses in the nineteenth century and their special prominence in the twentieth, especially in the form of Wilsonian nationalism, was consequential. Relativizing universalisms enabled responses to economic and political domination that were both constrained and transforming. Anticolonial nationalism, an important example of a relativizing universalism assaulting a generalizing one, was constrained by the normative dimensions of the concept of nation (particularly the restriction that an individual may belong to only one) and therefore undertook to transform diverse populations into singular nations with rights. The competition of generalizing and relativizing universalisms significantly affected the intellectual field: by the late twentieth century, generalizing uses of "civilization" were joined by relativizing uses meant to explain the rise of competitors to Europe and North America. (The title of Samuel Huntington's 1993 essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" exemplifies the change.) Indeed, generalizing uses of universalized concepts now are often on the defensive against relativizing uses. Generalizing uses of the concepts of liberal economics—extensively universalized after the disappearance of large-scale alternatives to capitalism—face only disperse and fitful opposition, but generalizing uses of human rights discourse encounter persistent challenges on the basis of national particularity and cultural sensitivity. The mid-twentieth-century shift in balance between the generalizing uses of universalized concepts that dominated in the nineteenth century and the relativizing uses that dominate today marks the beginning of a change in the structure of the transnational intellectual field. (Distinguishing
between generalizing and relativizing universalisms thus helps us periodize the transnational intellectual field of social thought.) Such a change is not the topic of this chapter, but we may observe that several material factors are again involved, particularly the rise of electronic media, from radio to Internet-delivered text and video, and the emergence of a polycentric economic and political structure. Because these conditions will endure for the foreseeable future, political actors whose goals are best served by generalizing uses (such as environmental campaigns and programs to establish labor standards) must recognize that struggles over universalization will take place in a field dominated by relativizing uses.

The Shape of Global Fields

I began with the question of what makes the “global” of global intellectual history. I am now in a position to offer a definition for the nineteenth century. The circulation and universalization of concepts from European social thought show the formation of a transnational intellectual field that by the end of the century was coextensive with the physical globe. Material conditions such as the resumption of formal colonization and improvements in transportation supported the field’s extension. Intellectually, the field was defined by the constellation of universalized concepts and the “particularisms” excluded from it through asymmetrical encounters. Geographically, if we account for both production and reproduction, the aggregate travels of the concepts in question would approximate the field’s scale and shape. (Its edges would be indistinct.) The field as a whole reveals a historically specific process of universalization characterized by physical circulation, mediation, reproduction, and abstraction, in which many critical steps took place outside Europe. Generalizing uses of universalized concepts dominated the field, although competition from relativizing uses increased by the century’s end.

Understanding the history and dynamics of the nineteenth-century intellectual field, and of global intellectual fields in general, requires a change in methods. As I have observed, many approaches to the study of supranational intellectual phenomena reproduce the national frameworks they set out to escape. Because global intellectual fields form through the transnational circulation of concepts (whether or not the fields reach the scale of the physical globe), we must approach such circulation in nonnational terms while treating the nation-state as one of several factors shaping it. For the same reason, we should resist “scaling up” national frameworks to the global level, approaching transnational intellectual fields as the composite of national histories. Because the circulation of ideas determines the shape of these fields, their scale must be defined by circulation alone.

Doubtless this approach poses challenges: in contrast to the spuriously self-evident boundaries of national history, the boundaries of a given topic in global intellectual history will not always be clear at the beginning of the project and will have to be refined during research.28 The examples I have given from the nineteenth century suggest some strategies for research that can simultaneously illuminate the issue of scale. The importance of accounting for the material conditions that affect both the circulation of ideas and their relationship in the field, such as communication technologies and regional and global political orders, should be self-evident by now. Because reproduction is as important as production to the circulation of concepts, global intellectual histories may need to pay as much attention to popularizers and the intellectual vulgare as to the well-studied originators of ideas and their intellectual monuments. Practically, this may mean examining textbooks and the catalogs of publishers of books and magazines for popular audiences. In addition to studying translation and the establishment of equivalents, such histories will need to examine the role that languages of translation played in the travel of works and ideas. Whether these were imperial, sacred, or mercantile languages (linguae francae) would depend on the era and the concepts at stake. While the genesis of ideas will remain important, global intellectual histories will also profit from looking for the moments when ideas begin to lose their association with one part of the world and become common property. Attention to use, in addition to meaning, will maintain a focus on intellectual processes, such as the universalization of ideas rather than the dissemination of ideas treated as universal in themselves. The same focus on process will help reveal transformations in the structure of global fields, such as the shift from
generalizing to relativizing uses between the nineteenth century and the present, in addition to changes in their geographical scope.

The intellectual geography that would follow from these methods would be lumpy, uneven, and heterogeneous. The position of “originating” countries or regions would change significantly. In the nineteenth century, Europe would remain the first site of many crucial ideas, but many of the important events would take place elsewhere. The terrain would be shifting—dynamic—rather than stable. Above all, it would be a complex landscape in which material conditions, transformations of intellectual practice, and political domination and resistance are intertwined.

Notes

Names of Japanese authors are given in the customary order of family name followed by personal name.


5. For example, Fukuzawa, Bunmeiron no gairaku, 27–29; Outline of a Theory of Civilization, 14–15.


14. Howland’s thoroughly researched Translating the West is an example.


16. The examples are drawn from Hill, National History and the World of Nations, 11–13. The book as a whole argues that the consolidation of the international state system and capitalist market in the late nineteenth century made these concepts credible and useful in areas where they had not been so before. For another compelling example, see Sheldon Garon,
27. Ibid., 383; Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, 515.
34. Andrew Sartori’s criticism of postcolonial scholarship’s focus on the “epistemic violence” wrought by foreign concepts also speaks to this point. See his *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 19.
36. As Omnia El Shalakry shows through the example of Egypt, the process extended beyond the work of colonial administrators. The incorporation of “population” into governance in Egypt, through the institutionalization of statistical, medical, geographical, and sociological, began in the mid-nineteenth century and culminated in the interwar period. Omnia El Shalakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Post-Colonial Egypt* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), chap. 5.
39. On these points, see also Hill, *National History and the World of Nations*, 13–14.
Globalizing the Intellectual History of the Idea of the “Muslim World”

CEMIL AYDIN

In the scholarly writings on the global history of the last two hundred years, we see special attention given to universal and global values, such as the ideas of sovereignty, nationalism, national rights, international law, and human rights. Various agencies of the United Nations and different international associations function on the assumption that certain ideals, legal concepts, principles, and values have both global appeal and legitimacy. This recognition of the globality of certain norms raises the question of the origins of these values, which takes us to the debate about Eurocentrism. Most globally recognized values can be traced to European intellectual history. A better account of the history of globalization and international history revised this question about Eurocentrism by emphasizing the agency of non-Western intellectuals and historical actors who were universalizing the normative values associated with “the West” at the same time as they were challenging Western imperial hegemony. Studies of the intellectual history of reformists, nationalists, and intellectuals in Asia and Africa are now indicating a kind of non-Western seizure of European universalism, a sort of subaltern fulfillment of the Eurocentric values that led to modern internationalism, and associated norms such as national self-determination, cultural rights, racial equality, and even human rights. In this new