

Dictionary of Transnational History

Global Intellectual Elites

(2000 words)

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Transnational history is a particularly fruitful approach to be employed in the study of intellectual elites. As we know, the traditional “diffusion model” whereby ideas and doctrines (scientific theories, political ideologies, cultural trends) were simply disseminated from the West, -Europe and the United States- to the rest of the world has been superseded in recent years by new perspectives on worldwide knowledge creation. It is now recognized that, original currents of thought were often profoundly modified in the process of adaptation and generalization in their new settings. In fact, it has been pointed out, the emergence of hybrid bodies of learning and linked networks of scientists and intellectuals, rather than a one directional transmission of ideas, seems a better way of describing this process. (Bayly, 2004).

Two consequences arise from this recognition: one, the history of this process is not just a record of how ideas originated in one place and were received in others; on the contrary, history is also being made precisely in the movement between different regions of the world, that is, the process of transition is a historical process of knowledge creation. Secondly, this process of transit, of hybridisation of knowledge, is effected by specific social forms: intellectuals, writers, scientists, policy makers and academics, and their international networks, conferences, journals, and books. The study of global intellectual elites is the study of these social forms of intellectual interconnection that make possible the creation of new knowledge.

This particular interconnection has always implied an inevitable tension between the two poles of global or transnational and local influences. Far from being ever resolved, the tension between the local and the global became a common feature in the emergence and consolidation of intellectual elites all over the world. This interplay can be interpreted as a tension between certain sociological or historical forces, -local or transnational-, or as an epistemological issue: universalistic or particularistic claims on the validity of knowledge. On the one hand, intellectual elites can reflect an ever present aspiration for the universal validity of knowledge over particularistic claims; moreover, -even more frequently in the non European world-, local intellectual elites resort to international references as a source of legitimacy and prestige in their milieu. On the other, national academic traditions, local practices, and singular cultural characteristics

generate localised conditions for knowledge production and the emergence of persistent claims for “national” sciences, ideologies, or cultural manifestations. In the realm of the social sciences and the humanities, these claims were reinforced by the demands that the processes of state and nation building posed on local intellectual elites to contribute to the strengthening of national identities through their disciplines (Charle *et al.*, 2004), or in the dilemma between a global epistemic community and the role of academics and intellectuals in their local, shared public culture (Bender, 1993).

We can differentiate between three types of intellectual elites in which this tension is clearly visible: scientific and academic communities; state technical elites and policy makers; politically motivated intellectuals and writers.

The internationalisation of science and academic life

The process of institutionalization and professionalization of academic disciplines in the modern university has been closely connected to the transnational circulation of ideas, theories, models, and individuals.

Scientific missions, international conferences, exchange programs, grants and joint research projects, specialized journals; all these have been the channels of interaction for academic elites, and crucial elements in the institutionalization and professionalization of academic disciplines. Transnational mobility, however, can also be a debilitating factor, when the emigration of a scientific elite results in the loss of a unifying framework, as exemplified in the decline of the Austrian school of economics in the interwar years (Klausinger, 2006).

The history of science and of academic institutions provides an abundant record of such interactions: the spread and adaptation of darwinism in the non-European world, tropical medicine in Brasil and Cuba, biomedics in the Andean republics, German historical economics and its influence in the United States, and more recently French historiography and American anthropology and sociology in Latin America, have all been fields in which local elites have had a *recourse to internationality* (Charle *et al.*, 2004, p. 21), both as a source of professional legitimacy and as a common discourse.

Nevertheless, as has been mentioned above, this search for a common transnational paradigm was constantly challenged by the demands posed by national identities and national scientific cultures. The emergence of the research university as a locus of knowledge creation coincided in time with the consolidation of the nation state

and, above all, with public concerns about the role of the state in preserving national cultures and national identities. Thus, local intellectual elites were called to put their knowledge to the task: sciences and academic disciplines were also tools for a better understanding of national realities and an instrument for its improvement. Intellectual elites in the non European world thus developed a “stereophonic” approach to scientific modernity: global or transnational paradigms called upon to interpret national problems, as exemplified by the obsessions with race in the emerging Latin American social sciences (Tenorio Trillo, 1999).

World War I represented the culmination of this duality: European nationalistic conflicts exploding at the pinnacle of scientific internationalism. By the early twenties, a disappointed Latin American social scientist (José Ingenieros) wrote to philosopher Henri Bergson, president of the League of Nations *Commission internationale de coopération intellectuelle*, that “the international organization of science had been severely hurt by the xenophobic passions aroused by war, nationalism and imperialism.” Efforts made under the auspices of the League of Nations, such as the cited *Commission*, or the *Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle*, were doomed from this perspective. Only time and the replacement of the generation of scientists and academics involved in the corruption of the scientific ethos by nationalism would allow the reemergence of genuine intellectual and scientific solidarity. However, despite the pessimistic climate of the interwar years, new forms of scientific cooperation gradually emerged.

The international circulation of people, of texts and objects of scientific research, and transnational ways of financing research are now common features of the contemporary “scientific field” (Bourdieu, 2002; Gingras, 2002), and give shape to a very specific form of transnationality: an international market for research and higher education with a strong bias for certain fields of knowledge and the predominance of English as its language (Charle *et al.*, 2004). In the field of the social sciences, economists perhaps best embody these trends: economics is today a profoundly transnational field, socialized in increasingly homogeneous programs dominated by American universities, (Montecinos and Markoff, 2001) and the consequences of this go well beyond the walls of academia.

Transfers of social technology

Just as the institutionalization of scientific and academic disciplines included a transnational component, the development of new areas of state intervention in social and economic matters gave birth to internationally linked state technical elites, a process that coincided in time, -from the late nineteenth century onwards-, and had obvious connections with the process of scientific globalization. In what E.P. Hennock described as "the transfer of social technology", i.e., the international adaptation of social institutions or specific pieces of legislation related to the new social question, an intense transnational movement of social reform initiatives and innovative public policies connected like-minded state officials, academics and journalists in such fields as labor legislation and arbitration of labor disputes, welfare and protection of children, social insurance, unemployment, housing, city planning, public health, prison reform, poverty relief, and many others. Therefore, the creation and circulation of this new "social knowledge", the foundation of many modern social policies, was also deeply influenced by its international dimension. To copy, modify, and adapt policies from one country to another was mostly what these elites were involved in. In Europe, German social security was perhaps the most notable case of an influential model imitated despite national rivalries; between Europe and the United States, the multiple examples studied by Daniel Rodgers reveal a recurrent "Atlantic crossing" of projects and individuals (Rodgers, 1998); in countries or regions of recent settlement, the willingness to experiment with new social policies was quickly adopted by reformist elites, in admiration of the ambitious initiatives developed in Australia and New Zealand (Fogarty, 1989). In many Latin American countries, the reference to an international precedent was the best way to overcome ideological objections: the backing of the "civilized world" to a reform initiative was the best guarantee its proponents could offer.

Technical cooperation soon expanded far beyond social reform. Agriculture, education, or judicial institutions, were all fields in which networks of experts and specialists operated as channels for the circulation of knowledge, connected through a web of facilitating institutions: intergovernmental committees, international conferences, state appointed investigative commissions (frequently promoting a modern Grand Tour to the places in which new developments were being implemented); well informed local journalists, who chronicled other countries' policies.

Structural state reform has become the contemporary equivalent. Again, national circumstances and globalization shape the agenda of state technical elites, both in the process of imitation and adaptation of certain policies and in the strategies of implementation chosen by each country. Philanthropic foundations, NGOs, national and transnational agencies, consultants, think tanks and international law firms develop what have been described as “cosmopolitan scholarly strategies in and around the State”: the use of international credentials, expertise and connections to build capital that can be reinvested in the domestic public arena (Dezalay & Garth, 2002). The rise of Latin American “technopols” illustrates how frequently this technocratic expertise legitimized by international connections has led to political ascendancy (Dominguez, 1997; Centeno & Silva, 1998).

An “International of spiritual life”

We can identify another type of internationalisation of intellectual elites: the expansion of philosophical, political and economic ideas with worldwide reach, from the Enlightenment onwards, a topic that has inspired a good deal of Western intellectual historiography. As an example, James Kloppenberg has brilliantly presented the creation of a transatlantic community of discourse in philosophy and political theory by two generations of progressive and social democratic American and European intellectuals, between 1870 and 1920 (Kloppenberg, 1986). Similar studies trace the ways in which publicists from the French Third Republic or the Spanish Restoration inspired hundreds of Latin American writers, politicians and journalists in similar communities of political discourse.

Again, World War I is a watershed: nationalisms fractured intellectual life and shattered the ideal of a universal republic of letters. Julien Benda’s *Trahison des clercs* (1928) amply illustrated the feelings of disillusion and bitterness raised by that traumatic experience. Nevertheless, the interwar years fostered the gradual emergence of new intellectual solidarities and forms of cooperation. On a more pragmatic level, institutions such as the already mentioned *Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle*, and the *Confédération Internationale des Travailleurs Intellectuels* (1923) developed forms of cooperation reflecting common professional interests, for instance, the protection of intellectual property rights of writers, artists and intellectuals. But they also fostered a new kind of internationalism as an answer to ideological

radicalisation, the rise of fascisms and political persecutions. A new international solidarity based not on the traditional, working-class internationalism but on the idea of the defence of the spiritual rights of a universal intellectual class, an *Internationale des esprits* (Trebitsch, 1998). In a sense, the ideological inspiration for this movement was the international expansion of a certain model of cultural action: the republican intellectual as the flagship of a rational humanism opposed to the threat of political totalitarianism. This *metapolitical* project was channeled through a number of international institutions: L'Association Internationale des écrivains pour la défense de la culture; the PEN Clubs, and several international committees of writers, artists, and journalists in aid of the victims of fascism in Spain or Italy. Cases of emigration to Latin America of Italian scientists and intellectuals persecuted by Mussolini's "racial laws", or Republican emigrés during and after the Spanish Civil War, and their strategies of settlement in the host societies are examples of the ways in which this culture of antifascist intellectual mobilization forged a new international solidarity.

At the turn of the new century, a new movement of solidarity arises across all national boundaries, paradoxically, to challenge globalization. New forms of communication give rise to electronic networks of writers, artists, and intellectuals in general, connecting them with activists and militants all over the world. Anti-globalization movements and calls for a new "cosmopolitan social democracy" are thus the latest form in which transnationality shapes intellectual life. It remains to be seen how the new global intellectual elites face the challenge of integrating the transnational and the local, the professional and the civic, in order to reconcile the ideals of global scientific, technological and economic development with local cultural values.

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