

HAP Lecture: 'The Global'

Locutions such as 'global history,' 'world history,' and 'transnational history' have pervaded our discipline in recent years. Historians have put forward monumental narratives of globalization and its transformative effect on the world. Moreover, scholars have likewise highlighted processes of integration and border-crossing in ancient, medieval, and early modern contexts. But the 'global turn' has also come under severe attack. Many argue that the marked dominance of Anglophone scholarship – produced in Western institutions, by people who only know European languages – has led to utterly hegemonic vision of the past. Global history, in their eyes, has failed to live up to its own cosmopolitan promises. But is the picture really that bleak?

In this lecture, I will explore two emerging approaches that seem to get around this conundrum. I will begin by introducing global intellectual history. Its proponents, I will show, underline that it is not intrinsically tied to an exploration of particular geographical areas of the world. Rather, it is geography, space itself, that becomes the central object of analysis for the global intellectual historian. In a second step, I shall introduce the field that scholars have recently termed 'Britain and the world.' It is indicative of a broader trend and ambition to combine, in ways that are still being debated, traditional elements of national and imperial history. Just like global intellectual history, Britain and the world leaves open the possibility for histories beyond the West without promising them. What, then, does this mean for the future of global history?