

Maria Jalava / Stefan Nygård / Johan Strang: *Decentering European Intellectual Space*, Leiden: Brill Publisher 2018, 297 pp.

Reviewed by
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Traditionally bound to methodological nationalism and conventionally concerned with the history of western political thought, the practice of intellectual history has significantly benefited, in recent years, from the proliferation of transnational and global historiographic approaches. Contributions to this scholarship have dramatically shifted intellectual historians' attention towards previously neglected contexts, authors and texts, while placing issues of border-crossing, entanglements, circulation, reception and hybridisation front and centre of their agenda. Yet, as the editors of this informative and thought-provoking volume underline, the need to "go global" can sometimes result in uncritical depictions of intellectual spaces, and the consequent failure to place adequate emphasis on their inherently hierarchical dimension, which predicated on historically-situated power asymmetries and mental hierarchies.

This volume therefore invites a reflection on the spatio-temporal dynamics that shape the construction and encounter of "centres" and "peripheries" in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. This ambitious endeavour is at the core of what the editors call a "kaleido-

scopic exercise": a methodological call for a greater sense of historical positionality in the definition intellectual spaces. The adoption of a transnational approach to the history of European ideas, this book ultimately argues, must hinge on the accurate reconstruction of perceptions of centrality and marginality, and of the ways in which these have historically shaped intra-European intellectual encounters and exchanges.

Decentering European Intellectual Space thus makes a powerful and much-needed intervention in the growing historiographic debate on centres and peripheries, while making a very convincing case for a transnational approach to intellectual history. As such, this book feels especially timely, bold and compelling. More importantly, the overall thesis of this volume is well-supported by an illuminating range of case studies, grouped in three, chronologically ordered, main sections.

The first part of the book, *Reconsidering Intellectual Space*, examines the intellectual strategies through which European intellectuals disrupted, sometimes consciously, conventional notions of "centre" and "periphery". Crucially, these authors operated both within the liminal spaces of the continent and in response to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century experiences of globalisation. Among these chapters, one also encounters an inspiring range of methodological insights: David Cottington's chapter, for instance, skilfully amalgamates the resources of cultural and intellectual history to reflect on the emergence of a transnational aesthetic semantics able to embody a polycentric experience of modernity. Moreover, Tommaso Giordani's outstanding analysis of the circula-

tion of Marxist ideas among Italy, France and Germany, makes a highly persuasive case for a multi-directional reconstruction of intellectual flows between cores and margins, able critically to undermine traditional conceptualisations of the links between the local and the transnational.

Section two is then entitled *Negotiating the Center* and analyses the re-construction of Europe's intellectual geography following the de-construction of the continent's political map caused by the First World War. For example, Diana Mishkova's chapter, which is arguably the true jewel in the crown of this collection, investigates how Central and Eastern European intellectuals negotiated political identities through a complex interplay of regional, national and transnational concepts. Her analysis also employs a markedly Koselleckian viewpoint that feels genuinely reinvigorating for the practice of intellectual history and that cleverly informs her critical revision of the concept of "marginality", while exploring broader issues pertaining to historical agency and spatialisation. Moreover, part two is also where the volume begins to enlarge its focus so as to link up the contestations of Europe's intellectual space with the experience of globality of the interwar years. Emilia Palonen's chapter on Hungarian intellectuals, in this respect, embraces a post-foundational perspective able to demonstrate how, rather than representing a well-defined conceptual framework that one can take for granted, Europe's intellectual space was imagined and articulated while developing linkages among the local, the national and, more importantly, the global.

Finally, the third section of this volume, *Cold War Dynamics*, surveys the construc-

tion of a European intellectual space after World War Two. In this context, Manolis Patiniotis' chapter is especially informative and considers the ways in which Greek intellectuals constructed the historical narrative of the "Neo-Hellenic Enlightenment" as a means of negotiating a vantage point within the intellectual boundaries of modern Europe. Doing so enables the author to raise urgent questions concerned with the importance of the production and consumption of history in the context of these conceptual contestations. It is especially at the so-called "peripheries", the author concludes, that history writing must be understood primarily as political thought.

This insightful volume ultimately speaks to the plasticity and malleability of spatial historical concepts, calling into question their traditional characterisations. In addition, as the title *Decentering European Intellectual Space* suggests, it highlights how their definition rests on the ongoing contestations of notions of cores and peripheries. Despite these markedly spatial preoccupations, this volume also succeeds, albeit not always consistently throughout its near-300 pages, in linking the construction of these mental geographies to the experience of shifting temporal structures, in ways that draw the reader's attention to broader issues linked with the temporalisation of spatial asymmetries. At present, this is a field to which intellectual and conceptual historians working in the wake of Reinhart Koselleck's "Begriffsgeschichte", as well as scholars of postcolonial theory, are increasingly drawn.

The editors' introduction also indicates that one of the book's purposes is to survey how "a broad variety of scales and spatial

dynamics”, consisting of often overlapping “social fields” that “transgress national boundaries” led European intellectuals to “mobilise internationality to undermine locally dominant positions” (p. 8). As famously argued by Sebastian Conrad, intra-European intellectual, social, economic and cultural mechanisms also reflected the experience of specific conditions of globality: in this respect, the volume’s analysis of the links among the regional, the national and the transnational would have occasionally been made more incisive by a closer engagement with a global perspective able to illuminate how the process of “decentering” detailed in this book also rested on a series of historical questions on Europe’s relation to the wider world.

These minor shortcomings, however, do not undermine the overall effectiveness and originality of a truly excellent collection of essays, which makes substantial contributions to not only the field of transnational studies, but also to intellectual and cultural history broadly conceived. This book ultimately makes a very persuasive case for a nuanced, fluid and malleable understanding of Europe’s intellectual space, while convincingly deconstructing traditional verdicts that advance monolithic and uncritical representations of these historical spaces. This is an intuition that historians should welcome with open arms.