

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A connected history of political economy in Asia and Europe, ca 1750–1914

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The history of political-economic thought has been built up over the centuries with a uniform focus on European and North American thinkers. Intellectuals beyond the North Atlantic have been largely understood as the passive recipients of already formed economic categories and arguments. This view has often been accepted not only by scholars and observers in Europe but also in many other places such as Russia, India, China, Japan, and the Ottoman Empire. In this regard, the articles included in this collection explicitly differentiate from this diffusionist approach (“born in Western Europe, then flowed everywhere else”).

At the same time, we will not conjure up more or less idealized, non-western worlds. Economic “cultures” are then presented in opposition to each another, based on clichés about Islam, Confucius or Hinduism. We claim that the historical framework of political economy is world history at large; papers here after will not argue that political economy has existed everywhere, but suggest that its history might take us to unexpected places of the world. In particular, we will focus on the connected history of political economies between some regions of Asia and Europe.

Thus, Alessandro Stanziani (EHESS) discusses the circulation and mutual influences between British, Indian, and Russian contexts, ca 1780s–1860s. In fact, liberal utilitarianists like Bentham, the Mills, and Maine developed their thoughts on this topic in a global context in which the identification of free labor was made at the conjunctions of debates –and their own personal activity – in Britain, India, and Russia. Tensions between serfdom, wage labor, and the masters and servants acts reflected those between multiple, connected identification of what “free labor” and “freedom” in general were. In a similar, yet nevertheless different way, the Indian context invited Bentham, then Mill, to reflect on this question from the angle of sovereignty and direct/indirect involvement of Britain in the Indian affairs, after all under the control of the EIC.

Along a complementary path, Andrew Sartori (NYU) examines the history of economic thought in India. Mainstream histories of economic thought relate the history of the economic argument in India to the institutions of the colonial state. At the opposite, post-colonial and subaltern approaches stress the incommensurability between vernacular, indigenous notions of the economy and the western thought. In fact, subaltern discourses of political economy were distinctly focused on claims about the nature of the social (in the manner of the classical tradition) rather than marginalist in impulse. This paper seeks to provide an alternative view in which entanglements and mutual influences coexist with simultaneous unrelated developments. This view grapples with two larger but related questions that exceed this narrow but more conventional framing of connectedness. First, how did the economic categories that colonial actors employed in political argument come to achieve purchase on Indian social relations?

This implies the need for a history of economic thought focused not only on the kinds of texts that were produced by Western-educated elites, but also on the ways that subaltern engagements with economic thought shaped the broader reception and plausibility of economic concepts in colonial India.

Pablo Blitstein (EHESS) will focus on the emergence and uses of the concepts of “economy” and “political economy” in late nineteenth to early twentieth century China. He discusses how “economy” could be conceived as an autonomous sphere of human life, with its own rules and its own order, and how it was increasingly divorced from ethics, politics or administration. In order to show this, he will focus on a group which played a key role in reshaping the social and political discourse of the late Qing empire: a group of late nineteenth century nationalist reformers who wanted to transform the Qing empire into a constitutional monarchy. The purpose of this paper is to explore how these reformers brought together two different sets of traditions: on the one hand, the ancient Chinese tradition of literati statecraft; and on the other, nineteenth century English, French, and German traditions of political economy.