The Historical Journal (2026), 1–5
doi:10.1017/S0018246X26101800

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ROUNDTABLE

Afterword: What Next for Cross-Contextualization?

Sujit Sivasundaram

Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, UK
Email: sps20@cam.ac.uk

When one sends a piece into the world, one sends it out and then tries never to read it again. Or at least that is the relationship that I tend to have with my own writing. But when it comes to 'Sciences and the global', my sense of the piece is ever more awkward. I wrote this piece quickly and I did not expect it to have so much of a life of its own. A historian can never predict what it is of their writing that is read and what it is that dies a quiet death. For myself, I had not read it for ages. So, when I received the invitation to have this dialogue around it, I had to force myself to dive back in.

The piece and the forum around it which was a collective effort including several friends arose from a particular moment in the history of the sciences, when it was difficult to stretch the field to engage with places outside Britain, Europe, and North America. To think simply of Cambridge and its Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS), which was the home from where this conversation arose and where this set of authors met to have the exchange which led to this roundtable, it was easier to arrange the history of science around scientific disciplines. One could ask a colleague if they were a historian of natural history or a historian of physics or a historian of astronomy, but not specifically if they were working on the Pacific, or West Africa, or the Arctic, or Britain. This articulation of the patterning of the history of science was tied in turn to a defensive sense of what science is and what historians of science should then attend to as worthy subjects.

It was not just a problem within an HPS department like that in Cambridge, it was also an issue more broadly in History Departments. Across the river, the landmark that divides historians of science from general historians in Cambridge, the wider world was often cast into 'area studies' traditions, such as African Studies or Latin American Studies, which in turn were grouped under what was called 'Extra-European History'. The geographical patterning of the wider discipline was such that Europe still was the centre for sure; but more so, those further areas were interdisciplinary terrains, descending from geopolitical and strategy studies, and where history was inseparable from other disciplinary methods such as anthropology or politics. I note that the forum where 'Sciences and the global' appears was arranged

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X26101800 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a dialogue between area studies scholars who were also historians of science, covering the Pacific, South Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East in turn. Today, the defensiveness about disciplinary orientations in the history of science and over what science is has given way. Simultaneously, the global has boomed as a marketable field of both historical study and recruitment. There has been scepticism about the inherent gains in area studies approaches.

Not only in these institutional and disciplinary ways is our moment different to the juncture that gave rise to 'Sciences and the global'. My piece was written as a study of sources. There was a reason for this. For when I spoke with others of how I was working on science and religion in the Pacific for my doctoral thesis, I was often asked what sources I was using. How could one write about the history of science in the non-Western world, I was quizzed, when there were not many sources to use to study science there. This manner of response has been successfully demolished by a new generation of scholarship. We are moving from the supposition of a lack of some kind, to a new set of concerns. This new array of questions highlights erasure, silencing, looting, destruction, coercion, captivity, and conflict, among others. Some of these come through brilliantly in the dialogic pieces arrayed here. Without the binaries of absence and abundance, or even intermediation, which arguably followed on from that binary as a link between two centres of knowledge-making where there is absence or abundance, we now think hard about the pathways down which sources have travelled across the planet. We query why sources have been preserved and why they have been classified in such ways that historians of science have not paid attention to them. The linguistic competence of historians of science has improved by leaps and bounds as also their collaborations with colleagues in the global south and their awareness of the legacies of empire and racism and patriarchy among other forms of exclusivism in structuring such collaborations. There is a penetrating conversation about ethics in this scholarship which is well evidenced in the writings arranged here. All of this means that 'source work' looks different. Research and writing itself is being cast in new contexts of politics and activism.

To be fair to myself, I should explain that though the piece was received as a call to 'globalize' the history of science, and though such 'global' history itself is liable to dwell awkwardly in the politics of decolonizing academia, the piece mentions resistance, disjunction, and immobility. I must be honest that before re-reading it for you I was worried that I would find too much enthusiasm for 'global history', but I was relieved that there is a decided pessimism in the piece. Other authors who write in this collection have also noticed this. This is in keeping with the general tenor of my engagement with 'global' approaches and even my recent proposal that we might be more 'earthy' rather than 'global' in approaching history. It was imperative and continues to be imperative that scholars are attentive to what the 'global' misses, where the 'global' ends, what the underside of the 'global' is by way of its makings, and how the 'global' is an artifice and act of craftsmanship in the past and now. For myself, my interventions in recent times have sought to centre the small: small islands, small seas, and even fragmentary material things. This too is in keeping with the nature of my scepticism with a galloping or universalizing 'global' and my trials in continually decentring not just Europe, but also India or China, or even Australia and South Africa, by searching for what is pushed to the margins.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X26101800 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I should turn to 'cross-contextualization'. I saw cross-contextualization as an act of playing. In the discussions at the workshop, I was glad to see that you interpreted it as a method that could create discomfort and that could distort the sense of balance or the status quo. It was never envisaged as an attempt to recover a voice or to speak for someone: I don't use the word 'voice' in 'Sciences and the global'. Rather in the juxtaposition of alternative sources it is possible to see the gaps and the resonance between sources, so as to interpret, to create persuasive claims, and to play, in the space in-between. Rather than seeing this method to be about 'voice', I would now see it to be about affect and senses of all kinds. For the sources that are cross-contextualized are material things and artefacts and not simply texts to be read for voices to be heard, which seems a particularly rigid patterning of a theory of practice around a source so that reading leads to listening. Additionally, the 'voice' that needs reading can be so individualized and the method of cross-contextualization is not about individuals as such but about places, communities, and knowledges which are more collectivized.

Cross-contextualization arose as a term and a method in response to 'contexualist' histories of science which were popular when the piece was written. By 'contexualist' history of science, I refer to a commitment to understanding the processes through which a thing, usually a text, is produced as a material artefact, how it travelled, how it was bought, how it was received, and how it was recopied and recycled. Book history was fashionable. But I found that such book history was ill-suited to work across cultures where the idea of the book took on such radically different forms and where orality, manuscript, and print cultures operated in relation to each other in ways unforeseen. Palm-leaf manuscripts were not dutifully conformist to the 'circuit of communication'. To critique 'Sciences and the global', one might say that texts still dominate the piece. But at least it includes South Asian art and Pacific material culture too. Regardless, if I were to rewrite it now, I would try to centre the things which are not 'texts' in the strict sense some more. It would be unobjectionable to move much more into art, into archaeology, into the sciences themselves, in composing a history of science across cultures. In other words, I think the play can be widened so that we are cross-contextualizing across disciplines even as we are cross-contextualizing sources as the two enterprises are easily aligned. Several other pieces in this collection highlight the gains of such disciplinary cross-contextualization.

Perhaps, cross-contextualization may be pushed further still. It may be that cross-contextualization as understood in 'Sciences and the global' is too binary and falls into the trap of casting 'colonial' against 'indigenous'. I was pleased to see that the piece does not reify 'indigenous'. Yet, why not cross-contextualize more than two sources at one and the same time? For instance, taking the example of botany in Sri Lanka, which appears in 'Sciences and the global', perhaps it needs to be interpreted not only between Kandy and Britain, but also from Malay, Tamil, or Dutch sources. Additionally, it may be necessary to cross-contextualize not only in the same moment, but across time, noting various interventions in historiography right now which seek to create discomfort not only across the gaps in sources or across geographies, but also across temporalities. This strategy is also evident elsewhere in this forum. It may be good to think of cross-contextualization not only as relating to the production of a historical piece, but also to its release into the world. What

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X26101800 Published online by Cambridge University Press

if such scholarship is exhibited and co-curated, or performed and co-directed? If cross-contextualization is not simply about 'source work', but about disciplinary dialogues, about more and more vantage points, and about forms of engagement, does it become too unwieldy to be of use? This I leave to others to determine as these broader ideas certainly take the term beyond the way it is defined in 'Sciences and the global'.

There is, however, one sense of cross-contexualization which is hiding in the original essay. It cross-contextualizes in Tahiti and then in Sri Lanka, but also places the two island societies next to each other. After this piece, crossing the Pacific and Indian Oceans became central to my craft. I've attempted to take the powerful island-centrism of the Pacific world, and its 'sea of islands', to the Indian Ocean. In the process, the cross-contextualization that became meaningful was about South to South rather than North to South. To say so is not to advocate for a flat 'global', quite the opposite. It is to bring particular and localized geographies into dialogue with others elsewhere with shared and similar but divergent and disconnected stories in the history of science and more broadly. To cross-contextualize in this way is neither to connect nor to compare, to refer to two dominant and different schools of global history. Rather, it is to be aware of the particular material contexts in each locale and the sources, knowledges and politics that arise in each space and to think alongside and with the other place. Of course, in keeping with the query I just raised about the dichotomous sense of cross-contextualization in the piece, it may be that the sites don't need to be two alone, but more. But as more are added, the depth that can be achieved in understanding is lessened, though I did try recently in my last book to work across several such South to South axes across various small seas. South to South histories are crucial in moving out of colonial discourses, but they are also crucial to contesting the nationalism which was in view in 'Sciences and the global' and perhaps more so in our world of populism.

Cross-contextualization is not the only way and never was supposed to be the only way to write histories of science. I'm curious about and open to 'fabulation' and to turning to more speculative and fictive means of operating in historiography. As was usefully noted at the workshop, cross-contextualization is perhaps half way to a more speculative method. The original essay argues against a narrow conception of causality and also against standard chronologies of pre-modern and modern. A narrative which isn't grappling with cause at all times, and which isn't constrained by time nor place, seems eminently open to less linear channels of thought. This way of interpreting doesn't mean that the author or group of authors is tasked with generating the speculation. It actively opens the possibility of attending to gaps, dissonances, and jumps across sources so that the reader can speculate. As for further modes of speculation, it is true that my recent work has engaged with animal studies and with more than human approaches. It may be possible to move out of human-authored sources to cross-contextualize with the environmental, the more than human, the oceanic, and the earthy. That too requires an engagement with various other disciplines and is a question addressed by authors in this forum. Additionally, a decentring of the single author in modes of more collectivized writing which are starting to occur around the history of science may also lead to creative and open-ended modes of reasoning and ones which are politically important in our present where, for some, mass death and bare life are everyday realities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X26101800 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This very conversation is a good exemplification of a collectivist and dialogic ethic. One would hope that it could be widened so that we are working alongside communities across the world as we seek to narrate stories and histories together and build shared futures and possibilities across distinct but related times and spaces. New kinships and relationships might then ensue from a multiply cross-contextualized Earth where science itself is distributed with a sense of decolonial equity. That is an optimistic note on which to end these reflections in the troubled present.

Cite this article: Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Afterword: What Next for Cross-Contextualization?', *The Historical Journal* (2026), pp. 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X26101800

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X26101800 Published online by Cambridge University Press