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## Towards a Global History of the Concept of State: Otto Brunner and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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### **Abstract**

This essay aims to explore what it takes to globalize conceptual history by dealing with two analyses of the concept of state that in different ways and with different objectives called for a reassessment of its history and for the need to make a step beyond 'methodological nationalism'. One is that of Otto Brunner, who, based on the history before the European modern state, assesses the need to disentangle constitution from statehood to be able to comprehend the social and political forces producing unity and order. The other one is that of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who starts from colonial and postcolonial state to investigate the non-correspondence of the global history of statehood to the history of its concept and to affirm the need to understand them against the backdrop of global capitalism. Contrasting Brunner's and Spivak's positions allows highlighting some of the major theoretical challenges that a global stance on conceptual history entails.

### **Keywords**

Conceptual history – Global Constitutionalism – State – Capitalism – Postcolonial Studies

### **Globalizing conceptual History**

This essay aims to explore what it takes to assume a global stance in the history of political and social concepts by dealing with two analyses of the concept of state that in very different ways call for a reassessment of its history and a revision of «methodological nationalism» (Marjanen 2017, 139-174) in the social and political sciences<sup>1</sup>. One analysis is that of the Austrian historian Otto Brunner, who, along with Reinhart Koselleck, is a leading figure in the German *Begriffsgeschichte* and editor,

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a reworked version of a paper presented at the International conference «Towards a Global History of Political Concepts. Theoretical Foundations and Practices» (Brown University, Providence), organized by the research group «Towards a Global History of Political Concepts» as part of the «Academy for Global Studies and Critical Theory» involving the University of Bologna, Duke University and the University of Virginia. On the goals of the research group see Bogues, Consolati and Laudani 2017. Among the most influential projects today working towards a globalization of conceptual history see Pernau and Sachsenmaier 2016; Fernández-Sebastian, Freeden and Steinmetz 2017; Schulz-Forberg 2014.

with Koselleck and Werner Conze, of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, a lexicon of modern German political and social concepts which was published in several volumes starting from 1972 (Consolati 2020; Blänkner 2019). The other analysis is that of the Marxist, feminist and deconstructivist philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, specifically the passages in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* dedicated to the Indian colonial state (Spivak 1999). Brunner and Spivak of course never met, they have very different histories, disparate theoretical tools and contrasting objectives. Nonetheless, the inquiry into the “impossible dialogue” between them is fruitful for the reflection on the need to stretch the boundaries of a conceptual history molded on European modernity. This task requires something more than and different to the extension of the geographical scale of analysis to include non-Western experiences of politics<sup>2</sup>. To reflect on the meaning of the global, an exploration of the epistemological consequences and potentialities of a new approach to conceptual history is required.

Those engaged in the task of globalizing conceptual history are confronted with at least two fundamental conundrums. The first pitfall has to do with the relationship that, since its inception, conceptual history has had with a specific theory of modernity (Scuccimarra 2008, 160-175). As is well known, in its original formulation conceptual history entails a theory of the relationship between conceptual and historical change and considers conceptual change on the basis of the major shift to modernity resulting in what Koselleck called a ‘temporalization of concepts’ (Koselleck 1972, XVII). The attempt to expand conceptual history beyond its initial German borders comes up against the challenge of translatability and comparability between conceptual constellations used in different contexts (Werner and Zimmermann 2006). Yet by relying on a modernization narrative molded on German history – and therefore focused on the transition period defined by Koselleck as the *Sattelzeit* [saddle time] which stretches from 1750 to 1850 – the comparison runs the risk of placing the compared concepts and contexts within a temporal scale based on the linear logic of progress and backwardness. In order to avoid this deadlock, the attempt to globalize conceptual history needs to aim for a different understanding of semantic change able both to overcome a Eurocentric bias and to grasp the new and unexpected modalities of semantic mutation that have presented themselves in the global age (Fernandez-Sebastian, Freeden and Steinmetz 2017, 6). Therefore, at the basis of any attempt to globalize conceptual history there needs to be a critical revision of the theory of history and historical time. In order not to fall into the unending and ultimately pointless task of mapping concepts on a world-scale, the project of a global history of political concepts needs to be built on precise hypotheses of why and how semantic

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<sup>2</sup> For a ground-breaking exploration of a multifaceted understanding of the global beyond its simply spatial meaning as applied to Marx’s work see Battistini, Cappuccilli and Ricciardi 2020.

change becomes historically meaningful and reveals wider processes of social transformation.

The second major conundrum that needs to be confronted relates more directly to the global present and its genealogy. The idea of first studying national conceptual constellations and then comparing them is challenged by the fact that the national State is called into question as the main framework in which concepts gain their shared or even contested meaning. As a matter of fact, attempts to globalize conceptual history need to address the growing interrelation of regions, the presence of transnational processes and the multiplicity of actors – private and public, economic and political, cultural and social – that intervene in the establishment of the norms of societal life and their contestation (Galli 2010). Against this backdrop, the current reflection on a global approach to conceptual history has important points of contact with global history and global constitutionalism, which are both engaged in exploring the transnational dimension of modern and contemporary politics. Analyses of colonial and postcolonial historical paths to statehood have challenged the classical conception of constitutionalism as a technique of freedom to limit power (Rudan 2016) and brought to the surface the «materiality of politics» well beyond its legal formalization (Samaddar 2007). Furthermore, a new meaning of global constitutional history seems to be in the making in the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies dedicated to the subject. Designed in opposition to the vision of globalization as an automatic process towards a “one world, one nation” scenario, a global constitutional history of the present strives to address the local effects of global dynamics, which involve not only the state but also other actors, and to stretch the idea of constitution so as to include not simply the legal field, but a wider set of normative procedures, disciplinary practices and governmental devices that give shape to the global order (Grappi 2016). In doing this, global history and global constitutional history rely heavily on studies of capitalism, the history of which has increasingly re-taken center stage since the global crisis of 2008. The fact that the initial project of conceptual history lacked any confrontation with the problem of capitalism as a social relationship might be one of the main obstacles to its globalization. What is certain, though, is that in the face of new forms of governance the globalization of conceptual history calls for a critical reassessment of the modern conceptual distinction between economics and politics, the private and public realm, and internal and international legal frameworks.

Consequently, rather than simply requiring a methodological innovation and a new toolbox, the global stance on conceptual history requires a radical and wide-ranging theoretical endeavor. Without aspiring to solve these major conundrums, this essay aims to contribute to this endeavor by discussing two attempts to consider the history of the concept of state in a non-progressive and non-universalistic manner. In spite of the huge differences between them, Brunner and Spivak use the history of the concept

of the state to challenge the assumption that it is the universal basis of political life and the only truly rational form of political association. Brunner, a historian of the Middle Ages, questions the universal validity of the concept of state by analyzing the past of the European state, i.e. the constitutional structure of the German medieval past. His major work *Land and Lordship. Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria* (Brunner 1992) was published in Vienna in 1939, one year after the *Anschluss* included Austria in the Third Reich, which Brunner welcomed as the final reunion of the German people. In line with the Nazi revival of the *Volk* ideology to maintain an uninterrupted German continuity beyond modern, liberal and Marxist understandings of politics, his work lingers on a whole set of phenomena of medieval politics that are at odds with the way in which modern politics developed through the absolutist and then constitutional national State. The practice of the feud, the relationship of aid and protection, the household as a space of peace and immunity organized around the role of the feudal lord: to understand these central constitutional factors of medieval political life requires an overcoming of the modern distinction between peace and war, internal and external politics, and State and civil society. The question Brunner poses is simple but crucial: how is it possible to understand the complex unity of a political world of the past without taking for granted a state-centered model of unity, that is that of an exclusive sovereign power over a territory and a people? Social, political and legal theories formulated in the 19th century are imbued with what, following Pierre Bourdieu, we can call a «state thought» (Bourdieu 2018, 108) that ‘colonizes’ the past, judging and measuring all reality on the basis of a State-oriented understanding of politics. Brunner’s critique of the habits of thought and disciplinary organization making it impossible to understand the past in its otherness paradoxically resembles the postcolonial critique of the way in which Western political thought has assumed that the whole world should ultimately conform to its own model of politics and rationality (Mezzadra 2010). Furthermore, by posing the problem of how to understand a political organization that is not state-centered, Brunner offers a crucial albeit unexpected contribution to the current debate on the purported contemporary need of «disconnecting constitutions from statehood» (Preuss 2010, 23-46). Brunner proposes an overall [*gesamt*] approach to constitutional history, that should be able to address every historical situation by taking into account the comprehensive interrelation of all the legal, political, social and ideological factors at play and, at the same time, inquiring into the process of the production of political unities of action that cannot simply be molded on the idea of sovereignty. Political concepts are a decisive “entrance door” to grasp this interrelation. As we will see, this leads Brunner to hold that the concept of state needs to be considered in the time and place in which it arose and therefore its analysis must consist of «the whole history of the European State» (Brunner 1968, 224).

Spivak, in turn, questions the universal validity of the concept of State by starting from the history of the colonial and postcolonial state. She does not focus on the past of the modern State, but on its aftermath, its «vanishing present», to quote the subtitle of the *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. The postcolonial state is not simply the state built in former colonies, but evidence of the persisting aspects of modern statehood that are at odds with its supposedly established rational, democratic, constitutional form (Ricciardi 2016, 37-71). In highlighting this, she underlines the need both to criticize the teleological conception of history that poses the state as the only truly rational organization of political life and to affirm the historicity of concepts when placed against the backdrop of global capitalism. For Spivak, global capitalism represents the material historical construct that allows us to grasp the interrelations of very different phenomena taking place throughout the globe. Unlike Brunner, Spivak maintains that the task is not so much to grasp the totality of the forces producing the order of the past or present, but rather to understand a global structure of relations. In this sense, global refers not only to phenomena that crisscross national borders, such as migration or global chains of production and reproduction, but also to a critical space where political concepts are confronted with the historical reality they signify that is both expressed and foreclosed by those very concepts. As we will see, what emerges from a global stance in the case of the concept of state is that there is not in fact a European modernity in which the State had a history that corresponds to its canonical concept on the one hand, and a non-European world that contains a set of deformations when compared with its place of origin, on the other. Assuming a global stance means acknowledging the constitutive non-coincidence between concepts and historical formations, and this non-coincidence is key to understanding the historicity of those very concepts and revealing their normative charge.

### **The absolutization of history and state**

In an essay written in 1954, Brunner writes that he intends to study «the presuppositions of Western historical thought» (Brunner 1968, 9). Starting from the mid-18th century, but becoming more dominant in the 19th century, an «absolute» concept of history is formed in European thought. Koselleck will describe this as a shift from histories [*Historien*] – plural histories that work as exemplar models in a cyclical understanding of time – to history [*Geschichte*] – history as a process open to the future (Koselleck 2004, 110-122). Brunner holds that with the structural transformation brought about by the rise of the modern state the idea of a natural cosmic order disappears in favor of the belief in the historicity of every aspect of human life. Before «man had certainly a history, but was not himself history, he was not historical» (Brunner 1968, 26). The recognition of historicity is coupled with a philosophy of history – cutting through the different scientific disciplines and

pervading political concepts – that absolutizes temporal movement and surrenders to the logic of development or to a specular historical relativism. The absolutization of history means that history becomes a subject with its own legality, volition and capacity to act in place of actual historical actors.

This absolutization has a complex and close relationship with the establishment of the constitutional state as the central organizing principle of political life. The strongest example of this is Hegel's argument that «nothing can be learned from history about the constitution of the State because the State is rationality in the world» (Hegel 2011, 183), adding that only people who form a state enter proper history. The state becomes the main agent of the very goal of history as the realization of reason, heralding the end of the relationship of lordship and bondage, which starts to be seen as a sign of the underdeveloped feudal times or of the "barbarity" outside of Europe. In this way, according to Brunner, the state, as the agent and result of progress, the author and goal of history and the herald of development, is itself «absolutized», neither in the sense of absolute sovereignty nor of absolute spirit, but in the sense of being unbound from the concrete historical order from which it arose.

According to Brunner, this absolutization reaches its peak in German legal positivism at the end of the 19th century (Stolleis 1988-1992; Böckenförde 1958), in which the state is understood as an abstract legal person that is the source of all rights and power. It is taken as independent both from society and from the subject of sovereign power, which has become an "organ" of the State itself. As an abstract subject of right, the state becomes the objective bearer of sovereignty. In this way, freed from any transcendent legitimation, it appears as an impersonal entity, autonomous from the personality of the sovereign, from the legitimation of the citizens and the support of those who dominate within society. For the state to work as an abstract entity with its own logic, mode of operation and coherence, its genetic history needs to be erased and its concept isolated from it. Economic, social and cultural relationships are artificially separated from the "absolute" state and considered as proper to the realm of an autonomous "society", whose development can be traced back in time without reference to the institutional structure within which it occurred.

This analysis is clearly heavily dependent on the specific context in which Brunner wrote. He began to shape his critique of the absolutization of state and history in the middle of what is known as the «first crisis of the Modern», which erupted in Europe after the First World War (Blänkner 1999, 87-135). Writing in 1937, Brunner argued that «faced with the new reality, the concepts of an epoch – which claimed to measure any historical reality through its own fundamental categories – sink before us» (Brunner 1937, 422). The whole political and legal culture of the 19th century was in the dock. Brunner was one of those historians, philosophers and legal theorists who

joined the Nazi party in the '30s and believed the epoch of the state had ended, because it had proved itself to be unable to fulfil its goals of integration and to mediate the contradictory movements of society. Rather than protecting the state from societal conflicts and the constant contestation of its legitimacy, the state's absolutization had severed its links with the only element that could maintain unity and order: the concrete and actual relationships of domination [*Herrschaft*] through which even modern society was organized. Legal positivism had on the contrary paved the way for the dangerous idea that society was a realm without domination, as this latter was being completely concentrated within the legal personality of the state.

However, even after the fall of the Third Reich, when Brunner was engaged in redirecting his research questions in order to make them fit within the new climate of West Germany, at which point the idea of the end of the state disappears from his work, the problem of how to understand the historical connection of political organization with the order of society remained the unifying trait of his work. For this task, the question also remained of how to break the vortex of the absolutization of history and state. To do this, Brunner called for a self-reflection of history on itself, with the aim of returning the state to history. He argues that it was only in the 19th century that specific disciplinary divisions consolidated themselves, based on the separation between the state as having the monopoly on violence and the production of law, and a supposedly de-politicized society in which material, economic and moral relationships among individuals took place. The belief that it was possible to write a history of the state in general, as an autonomous object of inquiry independent of economic, social and cultural elements, was a result of this fictitious separation. In contrast to this separation, the whole concrete constitution of an epoch needs to be considered. The notion of an overall constitution is borrowed from Carl Schmitt's description of the constitution as the «complete condition [*Gesamtzustand*] of political unity and order» (Schmitt 2008, 59; Galli 2015). This constitution «expresses a (real or reflective) whole», that is «an individual, concrete State as political unity or as a particular» (ibid). Through this understanding of constitution, Brunner aimed to delineate the historical determinacy of the geographical locus of the state against its purported universal validity: for him the state is very clearly a European matter. His attempt at historicization thus limited itself to the European, and mainly German, space. He had no interest in including the global 'outgrowths' of the state in its concept. In opposition to the absolutization of the concept of state, that allowed its universalization in any time and space, Brunner traces the state back to the purported unity of a European constitutional history and to the societal structure of domination that gives it its concreteness. We could say that in a sense he «provincializes Europe» (Chakrabarty 2008). This history leads him to delineate a typical, unique and ultimately monolithic European structure, rooted in the medieval conception of right as a



structure of reciprocity between those who dominate and those who are dominated, within which the history of the state acquires its concreteness. As we shall see, Spivak questions the very possibility of finding a unity of this kind, both within and outside of Europe.

To contest the absolutization of history Brunner also traced back a European tradition from which the state acquired its legitimacy not as an artificial construct or as an impersonal subject of right, but as a concrete structure of domination. By disconnecting the constitution from statehood, Brunner discovered the concrete structure of order and domination that lay at the core of any historical community able to act politically. However, the priority bestowed on unity and order produced a concept of history as a course without tensions, contradictions or internal conflicts. Behind this historicization of the state lay the longing for a more stable order than that brought about by the revolutionary cycle that had inaugurated modern 19th century developments. While industrial society was spreading globally, confirming that the historical connection of capitalism and rationality – contrary to what Max Weber had argued (Weber 1988, 1-16) –, could not be heralded as the distinguishing trait of the West, the priority was to discover the roots of the post-war state in a long-standing European legal and cultural tradition. The project of writing a lexicon of fundamental political concepts was thus carried out against this backdrop of a drive to uncover continuities and discontinuities in the European tradition. We will return to these outcomes in the conclusion.

### **The non-coincidence of concept and history**

Spivak calls for a historical understanding of the State, thereby implying, unlike Brunner, its structural connection with the phenomenon of global capitalism and colonialism. This is the result of the critique of what she defines as the “narrativization of history”, an assessment bearing some similarities to Brunner’s critique of the absolutization of history, although with very different outcomes. By the narrativization of history, Spivak means the transformation of historical reality into a logical sequence, which is used in Western thought to confirm the state as an absolute necessity and as the goal of all history. Anything that does not fit into rational politics by occurring within the representative and institutional devices of the State is conceived of as simply a preliminary and incomplete step that will ultimately and inevitably lead to the affirmation of statehood. What Spivak defines as the «simulacrum of continuity» (Spivak 1999, 207) is part and parcel of this narrativization, at work in the erasure of the fracture produced by colonialism, both in the national narrative of postcolonial States and in the narrative based on a linear conception of development. History as a logical sequence does not allow for interruptions or recurrences.

In deconstructing the narrativization of history Spivak cautions against falling into a naive historical realism. By disentangling history from logic, deconstruction does not simply lead us to the truth entailed in an existential “outside” of discourse. It instead takes seriously the non-coincidence between scientific or critical discourse and its object, social-historical reality. Spivak aims to grasp social reality in its globality, although in a very different sense to Brunner. She adopts a global gaze in spatial terms, but with consequences that go well beyond a simply geographical understanding of the ‘global’ (Consolati 2016). The spatial expansion of the scale of analysis has an overall critical backlash. The need to assess the history of the state by taking into account the different spaces in which it has historically asserted itself isn’t aimed at building a more comprehensive concept of the state by assuming the plurality of its forms or by considering the historical specificity of each context. The more the State departs from the logic it should be following according to its canonical concept, the more the disentanglement of history from logic becomes visible. We should look in the colonies and post-colonies if we want to bring the historical nature of the state to the fore, provided we don’t understand history as embodying the simulacrum of continuity, but rather the excess of reality with respect to conceptuality. We could say that the global stance is the epistemological mark of the non-coincidence between concept and history and this non coincidence implies the constant possibility of practical crisis, which is impossible to mediate through any discursive strategy. While in Brunner’s analysis the general focus on the constitution makes the present much more solid and stable, Spivak aims to come to terms with the historical instability of the «vanishing present» we are confronted with.

This understanding of crisis is central to Spivak’s work, also more specifically in relation to the historicization of the state. In the section of the *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that is dedicated to History, Spivak focuses on the history of the Indian colonial state in the 19th century. This historical period is generally interpreted as the beginning of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, from the purported absence of history to history in the proper sense. For Spivak the aim here is to criticize two historiographical tendencies in the interpretation of this period of Indian history. The first approach employs concepts molded on the Western experience and, since it does not find a direct and full correspondence in the Indian reality, uses them to “signify an absence”. So, for instance, starting from a specific definition of what the nation-state is – and implicitly of what it ought to be – the historians limit themselves to registering the lack of a proper Indian nationality. The second historiographical approach commits the opposite error: in order not to see Indian history as lacking, the historians try to identify a fully deployed Indian nationality, thereby even more strongly assuming the European model of development as the norm.

In this context, Spivak redefines the idea of transition from the pre-modern to the modern, from feudalism to capitalism, by substituting it with the notion of crisis as an interruption of the “simulacrum of continuity” and at the same time as a possible repetition: both interruption and repetition being the taboos of the narrativization of history. The logic of development is necessarily continuous and irreversible. Spivak follows the «haphazard process» of state-formation carried out by the East India Company, starting from the present global crisis and the current restructuring of global capitalism. She argues: «it is easily surmised that [...] the East India Company prefigured the shifting relationship between state-formation and economic crisis-management within which we live today» (Spivak 1999, 220). She defines the state formed by the Company as «misshapen and monstrous», recalling Samuel Pufendorf’s definition of the Holy Roman Empire as a «misshapen monster» (Pufendorf 2007, 176). Yet Despite this monstrosity, it is easily surmised also that the Company actually «engaged in the business of state-formation» (Spivak 1999, 220) to some extent independently of the English government, following almost exclusively economic goals in a «clandestine» way and in the shadow of a more public conflict of interests between the Company and the Crown. The state formed by the Company was also «misshapen and monstrous» in the sense that its discourse was grounded on an «exquisite amalgam» of feudalism, mercantilism and militarism. Breaking with any linear narration, Spivak shows medieval characters within this state formation.

However, Spivak is not interested in proposing a new and more inclusive concept of State able to account for these monstrous forms. The state formed by the Company responds to some canonical elements of statecraft, such as: the delimitation and conquest of territory; warfare; the construction of a centralized administration and a rank of public officers; and the “systemic normalization” of the relationship between the English and the Indians. It is precisely in the colonial context that a persistent need for sovereignty, territorial conquest, and extra-economic violence in the face of the constitutive crisis inherent to the globalisation of capitalism manifests itself. In other words, the historical state does not correspond to its concept: the diverse elements of statecraft never make up a coherent and rational totality. Moreover, does not correspond to its concept because of its relationship with capitalism as an agent of crisis that calls for a variety of state interventions to more or less violently govern the social relation of capital. Referencing to Volume III of Marx’s *Capital*, Spivak writes that capitalism in the colonies exported capital’s mode of exploitation, but not its mode of production (Spivak 1996, 292). Spivak criticizes the social democratic idea that wage labor comes hand in hand with political emancipation, and economic development with the expansion of rights. Supporting the critique of a conception of global capitalism as a form of society rather than a social relation (Harootunian 2015; Consolati 2018), Spivak also calls into question the very possibility of a constitutional

history in which the constitution is understood as «the complete condition of unity and order». To put it bluntly, global capitalism has no constitution. There is neither a global homogeneity in which the economic structure corresponds to a typical political and cultural superstructure, nor local varieties of this unity which correspond to different historical traditions. The social relation of capital coexists with forms of production and reproduction that are not directly organized by capital (Rudan 2019).

This analysis also influences the history of the state in the “center”, for even here a “normal” experience of the state that corresponds to its concept cannot be found. Thus, from a global stance, the norm itself becomes an aberration, a failed project. As Spivak argues in a dialogue with Judith Butler, «the experiment of the nation-state – suggesting that it is the nation that organizes the modern state – is only slightly more than a century old and has not really succeeded» (Butler and Spivak 2007, 75). The decline of the nation-form does not imply the decline of the state per se, but rather its economic and political restructuring for the sake of global capital. Taking the interruption of the “simulacrum of continuity” to its extreme, Spivak writes that «in financial globalization the wheel has come full circle» (Spivak 1999, 220). For this reason, the focus on the colonial state allows for a prefiguring of «the murderous, changeful, and productive contradictions between politics and economics within which we live today» (Spivak 1999, 225).

## Conclusion

As we have seen, Brunner derives a long-term structural history from the critique of absolutization of history, in which stability and continuity come before variability and revolution, whereas Spivak manages to criticize the teleology of history by coupling research into the ways in which truths are produced by history with a focus on the social and epistemological positions that allow us to demonstrate and criticize these same truths (Spivak 1996, 15-28). Brunner’s idea of an overall constitutional history as the backdrop against which concepts need to be studied relates to the problem of gaining an understanding of the internal unity and historical continuity of the European tradition. For Brunner, questioning the universalism of the State means going beyond the specialisms of the political, social and cultural sciences and trying to comprehend the historical reality in the overarching relations between society, politics, economy, law and culture. This comes hand in hand with the need to both temporally and spatially determine the historical validity of the concept of state, against the claim that it is valid everywhere, as the most rational form of human association. Brunner very clearly locates the rise of the modern state within the history of Europe and is a very thorough critique of universalism. However, he does not see that at the very moment in which the State claimed to have asserted itself as the norm

in Europe, it was taking on abnormal and monstrous traits outside of Europe. His appeal to find an overall understanding of the constitution leads to the recognition of a more profound order whose historicity paradoxically implies the absence of movement and change.

In contrast, through her analysis of the colonial and post-colonial State, Spivak concludes that from a global perspective the State has never corresponded to a norm, but has always been an abnormality – what Marx calls a «parasitic excrescence» (Marx 1971, 76) of society: it has always reacted in contingent ways to the specific crises produced by capitalism. Her global stance on political concepts is aimed precisely at highlighting this hiatus between the concept of state and its history: concepts are not the “entrance door” to the deeper interrelation of economic and political factors, as in Brunner. This stance also allows us to grasp the «misshapen and monstrous» elements of the state within the global present of financial capitalism, in its constitutive combination with a mode of exploitation which deploys itself in different ways throughout the globe. Spivak therefore points us towards a position in which the unity of the global does not mean a totalizing point of view, but rather the starting point for a radical historicization, which, while leaving space for the contingency of history, does not limit itself to detect different localized histories by placing them within the material framework of capitalism.

In extremely different ways Brunner and Spivak both introduce important elements to the discussion on how to globalize conceptual history and allow us to stress the theoretical questions that this endeavor entails. The two conundrums outlined in the introduction – the critical revision of modernization-based theories of history and the relationship between conceptual history and a new global constitutional history – require us to reassess not simply the time and space coordinates of conceptual history, but its overall premises, stakes and goals.

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