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Introduction

Facets of Hybridisation in the History of Ideas

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Editorial 1. *Double-size* (E. Pasini)

Special Issue: Hybridisation in the History of Ideas

2. *Introduction: Facets of Hybridisation in the History of Ideas* (R. Garau, E. Pasini, G. Pignatelli)

3. *'Nose of Wax': Early-Modern Philosophy and the Discourse of Conceptual Hybridization* (G. Pignatelli)

4. *The Hybridization of Practical and Theoretical Geometry in the 17th-Century Euclidean Tradition* (A. Axworthy)

5. *Christiaan Huygens' Verisimilia de planetis and its Relevance for Interpreting the Cosmotheoros: With its First English Translation* (L. Marinucci)

6. *The Contents of Different Forms of Time: On Ancient and Modern Concepts of Geming (Revolution) in China* (S. Cheng)

7. *Systematic Irrationality and the Emergence of Behavioral Economics: On the Hybridization of Economics and Psychology* (T. Neuhaus)

Special Issue: Historical Geoanthropology

8. *Historical Geoanthropology* (P.D. Omodeo, R. Garau, G. Rispoli)

9. *Geopraxis: A Concept for the Anthropocene* (P.D. Omodeo)

10. *The Evolution of the Anthroposphere: Historicizing Geoanthropology* (G. Rispoli)

11. *Mississippi: Working River* (T. Turnbull)

12. *Historical Geoanthropology in Venice* (P.D. Omodeo, S. Trevisani)

13. *Labour, Energy, and Information as Historical Configurations: Notes for a Political Metrology of the Anthropocene* (M. Pasquinelli)

14. *Transformation and Persistence of the Basin-Valley of Mexico in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (O. Rodríguez Camarena)

15. *Historical Geoanthropology: Book Reviews* (G. Fava, L. Meisner, P.D. Omodeo)

General Section

16. *Paper Money and the Fear of Excess in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (D.M. Batt)

17. *Book Reviews* (L. Timponelli, C. Pontorieri)

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Introduction

Facets of Hybridisation in the History of Ideas

Rodolfo Garau, Enrico Pasini, Giuseppe Pignatelli

Conceptual hybridisation can be described as a transformative process in which certain existing concepts and ideas undergo a commixture, or are intermixed into other existing conceptual formations, so that existing notions are reshaped and gradually renewed, or an unexpected novelty is produced in the domain of documentable historical dynamics of ideas and concepts. This special issue on 'Hybridisation in the History of Ideas' comprises five papers on dazzling historical cases spanning from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and covering European, Chinese, and American history of ideas, as well as their intertwining.

The majority of theoretical reflections on cultural hybridisation come not from the historical field, but from social studies, and are relatively recent. They appear mainly in areas of research that have direct practical implications, such as education studies, or peace and conflict studies. There, 'hybridisation' is often paid tribute to:

Hybridity is one of the emblematic notions of our era. It captures the spirit of the times with its obligatory celebration of cultural difference and fusion, and it resonates with the globalisation mantra of unfettered economic exchanges and the supposedly inevitable transformation of all cultures. (Kraidy 2005, 1)

It is also problematized, even at the same time it is celebrated.¹ Presentist emphasis on hybridity seems to easily become a jubilation of the *fait accompli*, that is, "the subordination of other cultures by the dominant European cultures (...)

¹ Kraidy, e.g., places as an epigraph to his chapter a quote from Tomlinson (1999, 141): "the idea of cultural hybridisation is one of those deceptively simple-seeming notions which turns out, on examination, to have lots of tricky connotations and theoretical implications".

in postcolonial renditions is re-codenamed hybridisation” (Nhemachena 2015, 81).¹ Even before decolonialisation, it has been questioned not in the name of purity, but rather of cultural independence.² Yet, the aesthetic, intellectual, and even moral appeal of “hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs”³ is a strong feature of some of the most lively and progressive streams of our culture.



In its root, the term ‘hybrid’ has to do with *hybris*: it refers to violations, insolence, violent passions, lust and wantonness, excess. The corresponding Latinisation also has a clearly negative connotation (Pliny, *Hist. nat.* 8, lxxix). It slowly becomes a neutral term, finally a technical one, yet confined to the sciences of the living or to zoological and botanic ‘philosophy’. It is only in recent

¹ Substituting for a more value-laden, a neutral and quasi-technical acceptance of the metaphor, hybridisation in colonialism has also been seen as working backwards, when “corporations altered economic theory to account for the need to rationalise sharing commercial advantage with non-Europeans. This alteration formed a part of a process of hybridisation in which received mercantilist authority was challenged and altered by international experience and shows how foreign merchants and interests compelled this alteration in corporate political economy” (Pettigrew 2019, 49).

² In a speech given by around 1930, speaking of the two dangers of ‘abstract universalism’ and of ‘national conceit’, K.C. Bhattacharyya, who was at the time one of the most important Indian philosophers, said: “The hybridisation of our ideas is evidenced by the strange medley of Vernacular and English in which our educated people speak to one another. (...) The hybridisation of ideas brought about by our education and the impact of Western political social and economic institutions on our daily life is one of the most distressing features of present situation. (...) Thought or reason may be universal, but ideas are carved out of it differently by different cultures according to their respective genius. No idea of one cultural language can exactly be translated in another cultural language. Every culture has its distinctive ‘physiognomy’ which is reflected in each vital idea and ideal presented by the culture” (Bhattacharyya 2011, 106). In his view, universal were only the “spirit” and the loyalty to one’s own ideals (109). On Bhattacharyya see Ganeri 2014.

³ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), as quoted by Tomlinson (1999, 142).

times—largely as a counterpoise to 19th- and 20th-century ideologies of racial, national, or cultural purity¹—that it earns a positive, interesting, even captivating connotation, that allows ideas and metaphors of hybridisation (Stross 1999) to be widely employed.

Hybridisation involves the past and happens in a present. It has been distinguished from hybridity because of its intrinsic processual and historic character:

Roughly speaking, hybridity refers to something new that emerges from the combination of diverse older elements. The term ‘hybridisation’ is preferable to ‘hybridity’ because it refers to a process rather than to a state, and also because it encourages the writer and the readers alike to think in terms of more or less rather than of presence versus absence. (Burke 2009, 1-2)²

Even from the point of view of social theorisation, hybridisation has a deep historical quality.³ Not only does it remix ways of life, social beliefs, and values, but it produces culture and knowledge as well: “So many classic concepts⁴ and texts would never have been generated and published if not for theory hybridisation” (Murphy 2021, 280).

In spite of the apparent sharp divergence between those hybridisation processes that imply a background of power, force, and economy, and those that

¹ This opposition to purity is still, even retroactively, part of the reflexion on hybridisation, in the form of the stern refusal of any prior, ideal ‘pure’ state and the position of a *hybridatio perennis*: “A first point is the prior hybridisation of peoples, cultures, and ideas. It is important that we move away from notions of hybridisation that conceive of two pure entities being melded together to produce a third, hybrid entity” (Mac Ginty 2011, 72). “A major fallacy regarding hybridity theory that this book categorically rejects is the truism that the very notion ‘cultural hybridity’ implies a ‘mixture’ of two discrete, and hence bounded, ‘cultures’” (Werbner and Modood 2015, xiv).

² Burke added: “However, whether it takes the form of a noun, verb or adjective, the concept of the hybrid raises problems as well as solving them. Like its synonyms and near-synonyms, such as ‘mixing’, ‘fusion’, ‘interpenetration’, ‘syncretism’ or *métissage*, it is rather like an umbrella covering a variety of different phenomena and processes.” (1).

³ “Hybridity (...) is a deeply historical concept. It comes about through hybridisation, a process in which new ideas are introduced into existing cultures and, through interactions with already present ideas, are modified, adapted, selected, and adopted. (Kovács 2018, 101).

⁴ In a section on ‘Hybridity in History and Culture’ of a recent volume, a paper welcomes “a move towards studying ‘conceptual hybridisation’ which appears very timely” (Lottholz 2017, 31, concerning the social study of hybrid subjectivities). Papers in the section touch the hybridisation of cultures and of Gods in the Roman empire, hybridity in the ancient western Mediterranean and in the Ottoman statebuilding framework, the ‘post-colonial’ in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and *Cymbelin*.

seemingly imply a set of merely intellectual lineages, there is a family resemblance between the two, and, moreover, the conditions of the former limit the materialisation of the latter. Especially in the Early Modern cultural transformation, e.g., hybridisation finds evident limits as far as assimilating religious beliefs, values or cultural practices from others is concerned (Essadek 2019). Yet, the Early Modern saw a phase of constant hybridisation (see e.g. Burke 2016) in the disciplines of thought: both, indeed, of ideas and concepts, and of objects (e.g. Gaida 2016) and practices—which in the end are not detached from the former, as far as they, on the one hand, embed and reflect, on the other hand produce anew, ideas and concepts. In modern times, these processes are undoubtedly still ongoing and likely are entailed in uncounted conceptual and disciplinary innovations.



Metaphorical uses of the concept, expectably, are not constrained, instead, by the specific limitations of the biological process and can attain a certain generality. Hybridisation in knowledge has been defined as the “admixture of information drawn from diverse sources (...) to make something new” (Winterbottom 2016). Since antiquity, *conceptual admixtures* accompanied the passage from one cultural phase to another, e.g. with Hellenistic appropriation and elaboration, or from one culture to another, e.g. in the Latinisation of Greek philosophical and scientific doctrines.

Looking at the past from this viewpoint, one can satisfyingly describe as ‘hybrids’, e.g., the grotesque doodles of composite creatures that inhabit manuscript margins (Camille 1992), and likewise the colonial cultures of Baroque and post-Baroque Latin America (Salgado 1999), as well as any hint of cultural hybridisation from prehistory to the post-colonial state (Stockhammer 2012). Hybridisation itself, as a concept and an idea, is thus born out of terminological and conceptual hybridisations, and undergoes transformations and reuses that strongly depend on disciplinary cross-breedings.

Hybridisation thus becomes a pivotal element in a terminological constellation variously denoting productive combinations and mixtures that challenge ordinary subdivisions and polarisations. The specificity of such unfoldings can be made clearer by comparing ‘hybridisation’ to that cultural phenomenon known as ‘eclecticism’,¹ which already according to early historians of ideas as Brucker characterized modern philosophy as “a precise defining feature” (Muratori and Paganini 2016, 6). The refusal of ‘sectarian’ philosophy and the freedom to combine the best ingredients of past philosophy were its principal traits: Leibniz famously wrote to have “tried to uncover and unite the truth buried and scattered under the opinions of all the different philosophical sects, and I believe I have added something of my own which takes a few steps forward” (Leibniz 1989, 654). Diderot would advocate eclecticism with the same eagerness of the present upholders of hybridity: “The eclectic is a philosopher who, trampling underfoot (...) all that subjugates the crowd of minds, dares to think for himself (...); and of all the philosophies, which he has analyzed without regard and without partiality, to make a particular and domestic one that belongs to him”.² Similarities notwithstanding, the hybridisation processes evoked above, on the one hand, and the individual, conscious, purposeful characters of the juxtaposition of the elements combined by the eclectic philosopher on the other hand, are at the opposite ends of the spectrum of creative integration of cultural ingredients.

Conceptual hybridisation, in conclusion, can be described as a transformative process in which certain existing concepts and ideas undergo a commixture, or are intermixed into other existing conceptual formations, so that existing notions are reshaped and gradually renewed, or an unexpected novelty is produced in the domain of documentable historical dynamics of ideas and concepts. Such processes—to which bakhtinian-like³ ‘unconscious’, ‘intentional’, and ‘polyphonic’ components might be ascribed—would find a test of their rel-

¹ Although eclecticism is both ancient (see Dillon and Long 1988, among others) and modern, here we have in view, foremost, the tendency that developed under that name in European philosophy during the 16th-18th century.

² “L’éclectique est un philosophe qui foulant aux piés (...) tout ce qui subjuge la foule des esprits, ose penser de lui-même (...); et de toutes les philosophies, qu’il a analysées sans égard et sans partialité, s’en faire une particulière et domestique qui lui appartient” (*Encyclopédie*, s.v. ECLECTISME, 5, 270).

³ See Bakhtin 1981.

evance in their being recognized and met with appreciation or ostracisation, or having been considered contentious in relation to historically perceived alterities between ideas and doctrines.



The hybridisation of concepts and ideas is thus, undoubtedly, a multi-faceted phenomenon. The Call from which the following papers originate intended to highlight and elucidate some of these facets and processes, from the simultaneous point of view of the history of ideas and of the intersection of disciplines that characterize the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas*.

This special issue on ‘Hybridisation in the History of Ideas’ comprises five papers on dazzling historical cases spanning from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and covering European, Chinese, and American history of ideas, as well as their intertwining. All contributions focus on quite specific historical cases, that entail at the same time general reflexions and methodological contributions on what such hybridisation is and how it works.

Learned terminology crystallizes several episodes and facets of the processes of conceptual hybridisation that occurred in the Early-Modern period. The articles by Giuseppe Pignatelli and Ludovica Marinucci articulate this perspective with different nuances and objectives. Pignatelli focuses on the history of a widespread metaphor within sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature on Aristotelian philosophy, namely that of Aristotle’s ‘nose of wax’. Examining the different polemical uses that Scholastic philosophers and humanist reformers made of this curious phrase, the article sheds light on the intricate sociological discourse as well as on the epistemic and moral values that surrounded and shaped the hybridisation of Aristotle’s philosophy in Early-Modern times. Marinucci advances a refined historical analysis of the terminology of Christiaan Huygens’ *Verisimilia de planetis* (1690) to illuminate the multiple layers of conceptual hybridisation that are condensed in this text. By comparing the vocabulary of *Verisimilia* with that of other works by Huygens himself and some of his

contemporaries, the article offers new insights into the internal development of Huygens' conceptual equipment understood as a process of hybridisation.

Hybridisation in Early-Modern philosophical and scientific thought lies also in the commixture of different knowledge approaches and the emergence of new images of the disciplines. This dynamic is at the heart of Angela Axworthy's substantial paper. Drawing on a systematic analysis of several textbooks and technical treatises in geometry from the sixteenth century, Axworthy locates the Early-Modern emergence of an unprecedented configuration and image of the discipline as a hybrid form of knowledge, incorporating, with no clear-cut distinction between them, both practical and theoretical elements.

Focusing on the Chinese concept of *geming*, Sinkwan Cheng's articles *The Contents of Different Forms of Time* provides a case study of hybridisation occurring through the translation of foreign terminology. Originally describing a change bound to take place periodically, the term *geming* was later employed to translate the term 'revolution'; however, the new concept of *geming* did not enjoy wide acceptance until 1898. Cheng argues that this depended on the discrepancy between different conceptions of time: a cyclical one, characterizing traditional Chinese culture, and a linear one, characterizing Western culture and informing the modern concept of revolution. Before the Chinese could embrace the modern Western concept of 'revolution', Cheng claims, they needed to have first developed the modern Western linear time consciousness, as well as a new enthusiasm for progress, so that a particular terminological hybridisation was contingent on a more general cultural transformation.

Till Neuhaus explores a case of hybridisation in the field of economics. Behavioral economics developed in response to a challenge brought by psychology to rational choice theory. Neuhaus reconstructs the debates taking place at the economics-psychology nexus but focusing on the axioms of rational behavior as brought forward by von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944), which have served as a basis for rational choice theory and have been, part by part, refuted by psychological insights. Neuhaus shows how these insights have been taken up by various subdisciplines of economics. On the basis of this case study, Neuhaus proposes a set of preconditions for the hybridisation of ideas, and shows how these played out in the hybridisation of classical economics and psychology.



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Netsuke, Tanuki as a Priest (late Edo period, mid-19th century).
Image from <https://g.co/arts/tmUVYwcav9G4vk9U7>.