

**Project Title**

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A Global Intellectual History of the Pacific

**Principal Investigator**

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**Initial Rationale**

The Pacific Ocean is not only a geographical entity composed of a large mass of water and myriad islands, but also a conceptual and ideological construct represented by images, perceptions, and visions of the people engaged with this thalassic space. The Pacific, like other geographical categories, is a social construction to a significant degree. Who, then, has spoken of the 'Pacific,' and what meaning has been invested in it? For whom has the 'Pacific' been conceived, and what intentions lay behind such conception? What images, representations, and systems of meaning about the 'Pacific' have we inherited? 'A Global Intellectual History of the Pacific' weaves a novel intellectual history to answer these questions pertinent to geopolitics, military affairs, economics, culture, and identity.

This project analyses the writings (e.g., books, papers, journals, pamphlets, novels, travelogues, and narratives) authored in modern and contemporary times by people of the Pacific rim countries, those traversing the Pacific, as well as those inhabiting the Pacific islands near the equator or in the southern hemisphere. It seeks to reveal and discover the diverse perceptions, visions, and concepts of the 'Pacific' embedded in these writings. The project includes exploring such intellectual or imaginary constructs about the specific regions of the Pacific, including Oceania, Melanesia, and the *Nan'yō* (or the 'South Seas') region (conceived thus in modern Japan). Our intellectual endeavour therefore encompasses aspects of Japanese intellectual history, Australian and New Zealand intellectual history, American intellectual history (and so forth), as well as the intellectual history of the island regions. Given the Pacific's deep entanglement with the history of modern colonialism, our project also engages European intellectual history and postcolonial thought. Moreover, by analysing how the various conceptions of the 'Pacific' born in different regions have been related to, and

have interacted with one another, we will attempt to carve out a distinct scholarly area—‘Pacific Intellectual History’—that cannot be fully reduced to the history of any single nation.

Like the historical scholarship on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, ‘A Global Intellectual History of the Pacific’ also examines the intellectual interactions bridging one rim of the ocean with another. Since the Pacific rims are uniquely composed of diverse cultural and politico-economic spheres, including the West, Asia, former European settler colonies such as Australia and New Zealand, as well as indigenous cultures, a transcontinental perspective bears important implications. At the same time, when compared to other oceans, the Pacific’s distinctive feature lies in the in the countless islands spreading across its basin, making this sea far more than a mere space for moving from one continental edge to another. Our project thus sheds significant light on the relationships between the coastal lands and such oceanic islands. We focus in particular on the island regions of the deep Pacific, such as Micronesia and Polynesia, with a view to presenting a distinct perspective on the interplay between ‘object’ and ‘subject’ visions of the Pacific.

The ‘object’ vision is that which sees the Pacific islands as ‘insignificant islands in a distant sea’ by approaching them from the standpoint of a Pacific rim or an imperial metropolis. This vision tends to belittle the islands economically, culturally, and politically, treating them as mere objects of domination and exploitation, or even as being nonexistent (modern colonial discourse and attitudes underlying Pacific nuclear testing being cases in point). On the other hand, the ‘subject’ vision resists such a trivialisation of the islands and pursues instead the creation of a new identity from within the Pacific Ocean. Put differently, the ‘subject’ vision is that which aims at the creation of sovereign autonomy for, and by, the ocean and islands themselves, envisaging the Pacific as ‘a sea filled with meaningful islands’ (exemplified by the vision of a ‘new Oceania’ developed by the Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa). Our project, especially when addressing twentieth-century ideas, intends to identify the defining characteristic of the ‘Pacific’ in the intertwinement and interaction between such opposing conceptions as an ‘an almost empty basin’ (a continental gaze on the sea) versus ‘sovereign islands’ (a gaze from inside the basin). We seek to capture the co-creation of the ‘Pacific’ by analysing this interaction.

## **Members**

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