Over a decade ago the US historian Charles Maier predicted that in the context of a globalized world the legacy of colonialism and western predominance will sooner or later become the object of pathbreaking intellectual and political debates. On the background of a long-standing tradition of imperial history, so far English publications have dominated the field of colonial history with a focus on the British Empire and the „classical“ European colonial powers. Therefore the volume by the Erfurt historians Claudia Kraft, Alf Lüdtke and Jürgen Martschukat represents a welcome cultural approach to the rapidly growing literature in the German speaking countries. As the editors state it is not just their aim to delineate the possible current readings of a history of colonialism, but also identify the manifold plural – locally or regionally painted – narratives. Furthermore the articles address the often invisible intricacies of colonial history – „those actors and practices, events and ambiguities, which escape the academic grand narratives“ (p. 1). Most authors of the book are committed to a trend of „entanglement“-historiography which encompasses the reciprocal relations between colonizers and colonized as well as between colonies and European respectively North American metropoles. It is along these lines that the seminal article by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler „Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda“ is reprinted in German. Therein they articulate that „Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself“ (p. 26).

The empirically saturated volume offers insights into such diverse topics such as the re-evaluation of France’s colonial past with respect to the French-Algerian War (Daniel Mollenhauer); the connections between the German/European colonialisms and National Socialism (Birthe Kundrus); the question about the status of the Chinese Qing dynasty as colonial empire (Peter Perdue) or the advantages and disadvantages of using a post-colonial approach with regard to the peripheral areas under the Habsburg rule (Anna Veronika Wendland). From a broad range of themes and approaches only a few can be mentioned more extensively.

The article by the Cologne historian, Jens Jäger, on the European visualization of colonial realities around 1900 covers a hitherto underexposed field within German historiography. By arguing that the visualizations of colonies created notions and visual patterns which influenced colonial perceptions in Germany far beyond the colonial phase, the author points to an important aspect of the colonial enterprise: namely the process by which „the colonial phantasies were so firmly rooted within the imaginary of the German Kaiserreich that a country without colonies became inconceivable“ (p. 165). Through this process of the interweaving of self- and outside perception, the colony and motherland were merged into a „hybrid unity“. As Jäger argues, through the discourse on colonies and the prototypic „other“, images developed as independent actors and were adapted to European visual perceptions. Despite their often ambivalent impact, the steady media presence of colonial images during the Kaiserreich had an important function with respect to collective identification processes and the in- or exclusion of specific groups within the nation.

The Seoul historian, Michael Kim, conveys a very different form of identificatory process by using the example of the Japanese colonial regime in Korea officially starting in 1910. This time period reshaped everyday life in Seoul and confronted the Koreans with a colonial and capitalist modernity due to the material reshaping of the city. The colonial regime was consolidated through monumental construction projects, a North-South axis within the city and growing trade in the Japanese residential areas, thereby demonstrating their „modern achievements“ towards the West.

For the Korean residents a visit to these areas resembled „a trip to Japan“ (p. 289). While on the one hand the majority of the colonized population observed such developments with a certain discomfort, on the other hand the commercial centers also had a strong appeal and served as spaces of desire and projections. Even more so: While the bipolar division of the urban space reflected an explicit hierarchy of citizenship, these supposedly separated spheres were constantly subverted through continuous circulation, exchange and consume of goods. By the 1930s, in the Korean media the formerly perceived bisection of the city had nearly disappeared – which nevertheless did not automatically amount to a social or legal equality of colonizers and colonized.

A very different form of exchange and circulation is addressed in the article by the Canada-based historian, Frank Schumacher, on the cultural transfer during the US imperialist endeavors in the Philippines. In this context the author demonstrates that the British empire was the main reference point for „inter-imperial learning“. Despite critical voices, the development of the US-American empire was strongly influenced by the role model Great Britain, especially during a phase of rapprochement and affinity in the second half of the nineteenth century. Using the example of the Philippines and following Paul A. Kramer’s argument, Schumacher shows that on a political, scientific, military and media level cross-imperial knowledge acquisition and application became routine between the USA and Great Britain. Torn between the own Republican tradition as well as the own colonizing experience with Great Britain on the one side, and the own participation in the imperial project in the name of an Anglo-Saxon civilizing mission on the other, the alignment with Great Britain often offered the necessary justification. Even though, especially in the face of a growing literature, one does not necessarily need to follow the author’s argument that the research on the history of the American empire still stands under the „peculiarly long shadow“ of American exceptionalism, the article convincingly applies an intercultural transfer approach. It shows that despite the recurring rhetoric of „exceptionalism“ since the emergence of the American empire, the USA always was „part of a larger history of European or Western economic and cultural domination of the planet“, as the historian Thomas Bender has argued.

As some of these examples illustrate, the edited volume integrates contributions dealing with non-European colonial enterprises and expansions and asks about their impact up to the present. Besides articles on European colonial practices and discourses, examples are drawn from Asia and North America. At times this choice raises the question if it is necessary to differentiate between the „classical“ (European) colonial powers and imperial forms elsewhere. Can one – as Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan and Peter Perdue have asked in their volume „Imperial Formations“ – consider European and non-European forms of empire in the same analytical frame? Or does one need to conceptualize the different „degrees of tolerance, of difference, of domination, and of rights“ as well as the different structures of dominance for European and non-European imperial polities?

Regardless of these questions, the volume has managed to combine articles which characterize the manifold colonial regimes with their „untidy connections“ (Stoler/McGranahan) as processes and states of becoming. In engaging across periods and regions, the volume offers a wonderful basis and a rich inspiration for further research within this dynamic field.

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3 Thomas Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History, New York 2006, p. 191. Whereas the new volume by Alfred W. McCoy / Francisco A. Scarano (eds.), Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State, Madison 2009, does not explicitly tackle the question of „exceptionalism“, other monographs and surveys in American and colonial history have critically engaged with the „exceptionalist“ paradigm.