

An ‚Imperial Cloud‘. Did a Collective Imperial Reservoir of Knowledge Exist in the 19th and 20th Century?

Veranstalter: University of Rostock

Datum, Ort: 18.09.2014-20.09.2014,

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An imperial cloud in the age of computer technology and nearly unlimited data transfer all around us certainly constitutes an attractive idea. The international conference „An ‚Imperial Cloud‘. Did a Collective Imperial Reservoir of Knowledge Exist in the 19th and 20th Century?“ at the Internationales Begegnungszentrum (IBZ) in Rostock – supported by the University of Rostock and generously sponsored by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation – tried to pick up and evaluate the idea. The procedure consisted of pre-circulated papers by the participants that were commented on and afterwards extensively discussed. Thus the conference allowed far more space for a critical reflection on the idea of an ‘imperial cloud’ than a typical format.

The welcome address by JONAS KREIEN-BAUM (Rostock) and CHRISTOPH KAMISSEK (Rostock) outlined the key questions of the conference that were organized into three sections: 1) Did an imperial cloud exist and how was it created? 2) How was it used and accessed by various agents? 3) Did non-European empires have access to an imperial cloud? Above all loomed the question if we need an imperial cloud – as a metaphor or a concept – to explain and analyze the complex processes of knowledge production and circulation in a colonial context?

In her keynote JANE BURBANK (New York) tackled the general questions of the conference by referring to the history of empires and the metaphor of the cloud. She pointed out that until the 1930s empires were taken for granted and were hardly considered as predecessors for nation states. In this environment empires competed around the globe for resources and land and, at the same time, developed a long tradition of sharing information and ideas, influenced by intermediaries like colonial elites, settlers, soldiers or even slaves.

Due to the diversity of these processes multiple imperial clouds emerged. In this context Jane Burbank raised the questions to which extent the content of such clouds was shared and if (and how) such clouds could disappear.

In his paper on the settler colonial present, the first one in the section_ Creating the ‘Imperial Cloud’_, LORENZO VERACINI (Melbourne) took the current social movements of the seastealers, tiny house people and ‘Freemen of the land’ as examples for a continuation of settler colonial practices in order to explore the limits of the cloud. Particularly for the decentralised knowledge transfers of settler colonialism the metaphor of an imperial cloud seemed to be more suitable than ‘archive’. The comment by DÖRTE LERP (Cologne) and the following discussion problematized the complicated reality of colonial practices that make it difficult to represent them with metaphors. Thus it becomes even more important to trace the content of a cloud in each case study to certain imperial knowledge and practices.

SAMUËL COGHE’s (Florence/Berlin) paper analysed how Portuguese healthcare politics in Angola during the interwar years, as an example for the inter-imperial character of knowledge production inside a colonial administration, were driven by national prestige and a hierarchical colonial order. The comment by KRISTIN MEISSNER (Berlin) enforced this argument by highlighting that the Portuguese administration – because of the disadvantageous colonial hierarchy – could ‘download’ healthcare information from an imperial cloud, also it was largely unable to ‘upload’ them. The following discussion focused on the power relations inside the cloud and the metaphor of an uneven cloud with different means of access by the various (Portuguese) agents.

The International Colonial Institute as a stage for the transfer of imperial knowledge occupied FLORIAN WAGNER’s (Florence) paper. He analysed the negotiations of private agents, governmental officials and scientists, thus not only leading to a new economical view of colonies and indigenous people but creating a nexus of several imperial clouds. FRANK SCHUMACHER (London, Canada) emphasized in his comment the linkage bet-

ween a practical cloud, influenced by men with extensive experience in the colonies, and a representational cloud, controlled by powerful imperial promoters in Europe, at the Institute. The discussion, however, stressed the representational role, especially shown by the competition for prestige and publicity of the participating nations. Furthermore, the Institute presented an opportunity for the transformation of scientific knowledge, like medical expertise, into colonial knowledge and imperial clouds.

The first paper of the second section, *Using the 'Imperial Cloud'*, by AIDAN FORTH (Chicago) and JONAS KREIENBAUM (Rosstock) focused on the origins and legacies of colonial concentration camps at the end of the 19th century. However, the media started to play a central role for the knowledge transfer and therefore the development of colonial concentration camps. Especially the Boer camps initiated a previously unknown media attention and changed the channels of knowledge transfer in the colonies. SAMUEL COGHE'S (Florence/Berlin) comment addressed the silence on some colonial concentration camps and the question how and why certain forms of knowledge were not 'uploaded' into an imperial cloud. The discussion tried to explore if anti-imperial knowledge constituted an important part of an imperial cloud and how resistance to colonialism might be fueled by such an anti-imperial cloud.

The Russian inter-imperial borrowing of colonial ideas and techniques before 1917 in Turkestan was the focus of ALEXANDER MORRISON's (Astana) paper that traced two failures of knowledge transfer: a commission led by Count Pahlen to establish a particular Russian way of colonial rule over Islamic Turkestan and the actual implementation of colonial rule based on the model of British India. The first one failed because of the strong tendencies to look for models in other apparently more successful empires also possessing a deep and profound knowledge about techniques and strategies of colonial ruling inside the own empire. Thereof the second failure developed by trying to implement a western model without considering the weaker power base of the Russian empire and the dependence on local cooperation. The com-

ment by THORALF KLEIN (Loughborough) carved out the importance of implementation for any forms of colonial knowledge – that is the imperial cloud – and how local circumstances and indigenous agency could influence such a process. In the following discussion the metaphor cloud was criticized for evoking a rather democratic picture of even and equal access. However, especially under colonial conditions power relations tend to be shaped uneven and unequal.

The following paper given by FRANK SCHUMACHER (London, Canada) analysed the process of inter-imperial knowledge transfer for US colonialism. He showed that despite ideas of national exceptionalism the US were deeply embedded into a global imperial project and relied heavily on colonial techniques and strategies developed in Europe and the Japanese Empire. While especially the British Empire served as a point of reference, the Spanish Empire and the experience with settler imperialism in North America provided important practical knowledge of colonial rule. These inter-imperial connections, however, never translated into a public acceptance of other colonial regimes or into a contradiction with nationalist exceptionalism. Thus, the US were able to promote and deny colonialism at the same time. In the comment FLORIAN WAGNER (Florence) emphasized the contributions of US imperialism to European empires and the following discussion expanded on the argument that exceptionalism was used as an aspect uploaded by the US into an imperial cloud. Compared to other imperial projects, exceptionalism went hand in hand with far more intensive techniques of social engineering in the colonies.

The introduction and implementation of settlement policies in the German Empire were the focus of DÖRTE LERP's (Cologne) paper. She linked the colonization of the eastern Prussian provinces with ideas of North American settler imperialism and the settlement of German Southwest Africa from the 19th century until 1914. Although direct connections are hard to find in the sources, all examples seem to draw on a certain knowledge reservoir, a settler colonial imperial cloud. However, on a local level this cloud was usually affected by other knowledge formations

and developed into sometimes nearly unrecognizable forms of settler colonialism. LORENZO VERACINI (Melbourne) underlined in his comment the selective processes in this knowledge transfer to local arenas and the discussion focused on the limited exchange of settler colonial practices.

In the first paper of the third section, *Non-European Empires and the ‚Imperial Cloud‘*, the paper by KRISTIN MEISSNER (Berlin) analysed foreign employees of the Meiji government, the so called oyatoi, in the late 19th century. These travelling experts – most with a technical background – were used simultaneously by foreign governments and the Japanese Empire to influence their imperial counterparts. However, in the light of the rising of the Japanese Empire especially the Japanese effort to control the oyatoi was considered a success. In his comment AIDAN FORTH (Chicago) raised the question of an imperial history in Japanese culture – that is the Chinese Empire – and how these experiences have shaped an imperial cloud. However, as the discussion made clear, a huge proportion of the knowledge transfer from and into an imperial cloud consisted of misunderstandings and misconceptions. And this proportion grows in the case of informal imperialism and when non-European empires became involved.

The last paper of the conference by THORALF KLEIN (Loughborough) tried to link the Qing Empire in China to Western imperialism. Although the Qing Empire certainly adopted western ideas, imperialism doesn't seem to be one of them. If anything, the Qing Empire until its disintegration relied heavily on their own imperial traditions and tried to combine them with the new Western techniques. The only exception was Korea, where the Qing Empire tried to use international law to secure their dominance. The comment by ALEXANDER MORRISON (Astana) and the following discussion concentrated on the selective nature of the knowledge transfer from imperial clouds. However, in some cases it proves nearly impossible to distinguish forms of Western and Chinese imperialism.

Among others, three important aspects of a possible imperial cloud were addressed in the final discussion. Many of the contributi-

ons showed the hierarchies of imperial prestige and competition between empires that proved to be an important motor for the colonization. Thus certainly more than one imperial cloud existed. Indeed the power relations between several imperial clouds might be one reason for the quick spreading of imperial ideas. This even left space for anti-imperial knowledge in these clouds.

Beyond the selective transfer of knowledge into and from imperial clouds, the seemingly democratic access to clouds was one focus of the final discussion. On the one hand clouds do – through that notion of egalitarian user rights – disguise power relations that are crucial for colonialism. On the other hand they encourage us to think of indigenous people and non-European empires as powerful agents with access to such clouds – in contrast especially to 'colonial archives' which were used themselves as imperial tools and wherein written sources of the colonizers are predominant. The next step must be to analyse the history of the (metaphor) 'cloud' more thoroughly than it was possible at the conference. However, the cloud might be fitting for filling in a gap that persisted in many research projects and likely interrelates with the lack of written sources on certain topics.

Cloud technology creates the ideal of equal, neutral, decentralized and timeless knowledge. Knowledge in a colonial context rarely was equal or neutral and a decentralized picture grasped only some forms of colonialism like for example settler colonialism. However, in the 19th and 20th century distances played an important role. It was not possible to down- or upload from anywhere at any time from or into a cloud. This leads to another crucial point for working with metaphors: time and periodization. If imperial clouds existed, they certainly changed and developed over time and for this and the other reasons mentioned it might be necessary to explore for every timeframe and case study the usefulness of the metaphor.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction

Christoph Kamssek (Berlin) / Jonas Kreienbaum (Rostock), An Imperial Cloud?

Keynote

Jane Burbank (New York), Taken for Granted, Taken, Granted: The Habitus of Imperial Power

Section I. Creating the 'Imperial Cloud'

Panel 1

Chair: Benedikt Stuchtey (Marburg)

Lorenzo Veracini (Melbourne), The Settler Colonial Present in the 'Cloud'

Comment: Dörte Lerp (Cologne)

Panel 2

Chair: Alexandra Przyrembel (Berlin)

Samuël Coghe (Florence/Berlin), Inter-Imperial Learning and African Healthcare in Portuguese Angola in the Interwar Period

Comment: Kristin Meißner (Berlin)

Florian Wagner (Florence), The International Colonial Institute and the Exchange of Colonial Knowledge

Comment: Frank Schumacher (London, Canada)

Section II. Using the 'Imperial Cloud'

Panel 3

Chair: Andreas Eckert (Berlin)

Aidan Forth (Chicago) / Jonas Kreienbaum (Rostock), The Origins and Legacies of Colonial Concentration Camps: A View from the „Imperial Cloud“

Comment: Samuël Coghe (Florence/Berlin)

Alexander Morrison (Astana), Creating a Colonial Shari'a for Russian Turkestan. Count Pahlen, the Hidayat, and Anglo-Muhammadan Law

Comment: Thoralf Klein (Loughborough)

Panel 4

Chair: Ulrike Lindner (Cologne)

Frank Schumacher (London, Canada), Embedded Empire: The United States and Colonialism

Comment: Florian Wagner (Florence)

Dörte Lerp (Cologne), Beyond the Prairie. Adopting, Adapting and Transforming Settlement Policies within the German Empire

Comment: Lorenzo Veracini (Melbourne)

Section III. Non-European Empires and the 'Imperial Cloud'

Panel 5

Chair: Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Rostock)

Kristin Meißner (Berlin), Expertise as a Political Resource. Oyatoi in Meiji-Japan

Comment: Aidan Forth (Chicago)

Thoralf Klein (Loughborough), Why China Learned Little from Western Imperialism – and What it Learned

Comment: Alexander Morrison (Astana)

Final discussion

Tagungsbericht *An 'Imperial Cloud'. Did a Collective Imperial Reservoir of Knowledge Exist in the 19th and 20th Century?* 18.09.2014–20.09.2014, in: H-Soz-Kult 06.12.2014.