

HT 2016: Towards a Better Life? Migration, Social Mobility, and Indo-European Exchanges in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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The German Historians' Convention 2016 in Hamburg for the first time selected a non-western country, India, as its partner country. This selection was mirrored in a wide range of panels that sought to de-center an often times largely European perspective of German historiography, and topically focused on subjects and approaches that reinforced this shift in scholarly emphasis. The panel „Towards a better life? Migration, Social Mobility, and Indo-European Exchanges in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries“, co-organized by MARGRET FRENZ (Oxford/Nantes) and MORITZ VON BRESCIUS (Konstanz) in this respect formed one of the most interesting and fruitful panels of the convention. Engaging with social histories of migration, bringing into focus the granular nuances of an increasingly interconnected world in the last two centuries, the panel explored a number of avenues that are still underrepresented in the study of social mobility.

Histories of migration – despite their strong tendency of interpreting history as connected, transnational, and entangled – are still predominantly concerned with a linearity of movement that informs a perspective on historical developments that hides complexity, even while attempting to decipher it. To a large extent due to the availability of sources, their subject frequently remains tied to the point of arrival, rather than encompassing the entire process of mobility. In its colonial context and specifically in relation to South Asian history, this is accompanied by an emphasis on out-migration that echoes the hierarchical difference between metropolis and periphery, and reinforces the linear portrayal of mobility: While „reverse“ flows of migration concerning Europeans tend to be the subject of

political or economic history rather than history of migration, migratory flows within the periphery – within or even between empires – remain significantly under-researched. Similarly, while there has been a noticeable increase in studies focusing on other stages in the migration process in recent times, the prelude and preparation of mobility, its initial stages within the country of origin, the in-between stage of the journey as well as the aftermath of arrival, secondary migration, and the memory of the migration process have received much less attention. Lastly, migration tends to be depicted as a consciously planned process with an ultimate arrival point fixed in advance – an interpretation that certainly has its merits when discussing relatively organized forms of migration, for instance the movement of large bodies of labor forces or as part of penal processes. This narrative, however, tends to obscure a significant body of migratory processes with either circular or itinerant characteristics.

The panel clearly addressed these problems already in its composition, emphasizing „reverse flows“ of migration, secondary migration, and issues relating to the memory of migration. Most prominently, it focused on the figure of the „imperial outsider“ (von Brescius), an allegory with a range of facets implicitly explored by several presentations. Von Brescius introduced the term in the panel and used it to describe German academics employed by British colonial rule in India in the mid-nineteenth century, though it could equally have been applied to many of their collaborators. In a similar way, CHRISTOF DEJUNG (Konstanz) focused on European employees of a Swiss company doing business in British India and their collaboration with Indian mercantile capital. APARAJITH RAMNATH (Kozhikode) – whose paper had to be read out by Frenz in his absence – partially reversed this perspective, looking at Indian and German technical experts during the late colonial period living in the respective other country. In her own paper, MARGRET FRENZ studied a different set of „imperial outsiders“ in exploring the history of medical services under both British and French colonial rule and the contributions of migrant Indian physicians in other parts of the Em-

pire. ELIZABETH BUETTNER (Amsterdam) shifted the perspective to the aftermath of migration and the role of memory in the construction of post-migration identities, studying Indian and Surinamese migrant communities respectively in Britain and the Netherlands. The panel was concluded with a commentary by JOHN DARWIN (Oxford), summarizing the discussion.

Von Brescius introduced the term „imperial outsiders“ with reference to the Schlagintweit brothers, three German geographers from the Humboldtian school of thought who were hired in 1854 by the British East India Company, at the time ruling India, to conduct surveys of the Himalayas and parts of Central Asia, operating both within and beyond the frontiers of British India. The Schlagintweits continued to receive generous funding and other support from the British Indian state throughout their long years of service, despite growing resentment among the British scientific community, founded both on xenophobic antipathy and resentment over British funding for German scientific explorations the results of which were supposedly withheld from the British academe. British support to the brothers was finally withdrawn in the 1860s, but the Schlagintweit explorations instead fed into the emerging German colonial imagination, especially after one of the brothers had been executed as a spy in Central Asia after returning there without British diplomatic support.

Von Brescius' analysis used the case of the Schlagintweits to craft a compelling narrative of connectedness in mid-nineteenth century Europe and Asia, ranging from the establishment of German academic networks in Britain that enabled German scholars to make use of British colonial rule to the depictions of relations between European and „indigenous“ scholars, helpers, and informers and a critical evaluation of scholarly tendencies even in recent times to downplay the latter as mere „local knowledge“. Embedding the narrative in a depiction of scholarly enterprise that made use of colonial institutions such as jails and hospitals to acquire and preserve body parts or produce plaster castes of „indigenous“ faces, the analysis engaged with the manifold layers of the inextricable link be-

tween colonial rule and colonial science. At the same time, the major thrust of the argument remained on the figure of the „imperial outsider“, a category of people in service to colonial rule that provided specific functions to the imperial order, but nevertheless continued to remain vulnerable. In this respect, von Brescius argued that the supposed detachment of German scholars – as representatives of a European scientific community not yet part of a competing colonial project – formed one of the most important prerequisites for their long-standing political patronage, and may even have helped in accessing the supposedly „local“ knowledge necessary for the conduct of geographical surveys in the frontier regions of the British empire. Yet, at the same time, the colonial state's largesse on scholars who – after all – remained outsiders became increasingly contested, and finally withdrawn.

Christof Dejung, in turn, observed a different facet of colonial history related to the figure of the imperial outsider in pointing out the at times surprisingly low level of penetration of the colonial economy by British capital. The Swiss firm he studied, Volkhart, remained one of the two leading exporters of Indian cotton in the late nineteenth century, specializing on the shipment of Indian cotton to East Asia and Continental Europe – i.e. to areas beyond British imperial rule – and relying on intricate links with Indian mercantile groups that continued to control access to local markets. The focus of Dejung's analysis rested on the depiction of the firm as a „contact zone“ between European and Asian actors, following Mary Lousie Pratt, in that it constituted an arena of interaction rather than segregation, though obviously with strongly asymmetrical characteristics. The dependence of the Volkhart business on local intermediation especially on the supply side of its business networks and its relative detachment from racial stereotyping underlying the colonial narrative of separation combined to give the Swiss firm an incentive to prioritize collaboration with Asian mercantile and peasant communities. While Dejung's depiction made it clear that Swiss and other European employees of Volkhart straddled two distinct worlds, their everyday social lives being partly embedded in British

colonial culture, this was reflected in highly appreciative positions on their „indigenous“ business partners, described by one Volkhart employee as „a class of men who would be an ornament to any commercial community in and out of India ... [that was] honest, straightforward and reliable in their dealings with others and cautious, nay conservative, as regards their own affairs“ – a depiction that was reinforced by official company policy, and contrasts strongly to the dominant colonial narrative even on the largely collaborative mercantile segments of Indian society. Moving beyond the illustration of connectedness, Dejung used the firm’s positioning vis-à-vis colonial segregation narratives to point out the close similarities that still existed in the second half of the nineteenth century between European and Indian mercantile practices and ethical codes, and enabled close interaction – an aspect of colonial business that continues to remain sorely under-researched in a field of literature that emphasizes difference over commonalities.

While the papers by von Brescius and Dejung were looking at the interaction of „imperial outsiders“ in Asian contexts, the contribution by Aparajith Ramnath went one step further in the study of dimensions of connectedness between India and Europe in contrasting the histories of technical experts from Germany and India living in the respective other country. Following examples set by Chris Manjapra and Christina Lubinski, the paper identified alternative idioms of identity that emerged and evolved parallel to colonial narratives. In particular, it engaged with questions on how the colonial Indian state viewed German technical experts and German-trained Indian experts, and the effects on this by the rise of Nazism. Conversely, Ramnath extended the inquiry into identity and mobility by studying the ways in which emerging nationalist sentiments in India affected the decision to study in Germany.

Margret Frenz, in turn, deepened the panel’s focus on non-European mobility, and added another layer of connectedness in discussing the histories of migration of Indian physicians migrating to other colonies, taking into account not only the British but also the French colonial context. Depicting the in-

creasing entanglement of colonized regions and colonial spheres, Frenz returned to the emphasis on migrants straddling divides between different worlds, simultaneously occupying positions of different status. The physicians discussed by her constituted an elite among migrants, having been trained for and fulfilling functional roles for the imperial order in their service, yet remaining outsiders not only in their countries of destination, but also by continuing to be „subalterns“ among the colonial elite. Her paper also highlighted a facet otherwise often unrecognized in the history of migration in depicting the itinerant character of migrants who repeatedly moved to different areas of the respective colonial spheres, engaging with distinct regimes of mobility and immigration that differed significantly between the French and British colonial contexts as well as between the ideas underlying its codification and lived experience. Analyzing both formal and real restrictions on mobility within and between empires, Frenz concluded by depicting the French colonial context as characterized by a „fragmented citizenship“ based on race and class distinctions as opposed to a British imperial citizenship based on universality, but modified by gradations of privilege according to the level of „British-ness“.

The final paper of the panel by Elizabeth Buettner shifted the debate towards the study of memory in migration processes. Contrasting political activism by migrant groups in Britain and the Netherlands, Buettner analyzed the ways in which the remembrance of migration supported or hampered the construction of inter-ethnic collaborations between migrant groups against racism in their new homes, and the resulting processes of migrant identity construction. Her study engaged with the history of the Indian Workers’ Association (IWA) in the British West Midlands which originally reinforced constructions of identity based partially on migrants’ experiences in their country of origin apart from the experience of discrimination in Britain. The IWA propagated an amalgamation of identity based on class but overlaid by the migratory experience, though migrant groups in Britain reverted more strongly to identity constructions based on commu-

nity since the 1980s. This was contrasted with Surinamese migrants in the Netherlands. Here, the two stages of migration – first becoming part of the multi-ethnic Surinamese society, before joining the multi-ethnic immigrant population of the Netherlands – reinforced fragmentation processes among the immigrants which, in turn, provided an obstacle to inter-ethnic alliances against racism and led to tensions between Surinamese migrant communities of different background.

Session Overview:

Session conveners: Margret Frenz (Oxford / Nantes) / Moritz von Brescius (Konstanz)

Margret Frenz (Oxford / Nantes) / Moritz von Brescius (Konstanz): Introduction

Moritz von Brescius (Konstanz): Empires of Opportunity: German Scholars Between Asia and Europe in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Christof Dejung (Berlin): The Firm as Contact Zone. European and Indian Staff in the Merchant House Volkart Bros., 1850s–1950s

Aparajith Ramnath (Kozhikode): Engineers Beyond Empire: The Circulation of Technical Experts between India and Germany, c. 1900–1960

Margret Frenz (Oxford / Nantes): Treating the Empire: Indian Doctors in the (Post-) Colonial British and French Sphere, c. 1900–1960

Elizabeth Buettner (Amsterdam): Looking Back After Migration: Indian- Descended Communities Revisit the Colonial Past in Postcolonial Britain and the Netherlands

John Darwin (Oxford): Comment

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