

In-Between Empires: Trans-imperial History in a Global Age

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The objective of this international workshop was to make an intervention in recent Empire Studies. In their call for papers, the organizers of the workshop, DANIEL HEDINGER (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich/German Historical Institute Rome), NADIN HEÉ (Free University Berlin/Max Planck Institute for the History of Science), and SATOSHI MIZUTANI (Doshisha University), asked for contributions that could help to establish „a trans-imperial approach to the history of empires“ by focusing „on spaces ‘in-between’ empires – their connectivity, cooperation, and competition“, but also to discuss the „possibilities and limits of a trans-imperial approach for the historiography per se“. They claimed that „whereas national history has been transnationalized in the past decades, the same does not hold true for the history of empires“. The idea was to decentralize the history of empires and move away from the idea that the British Empire was the definitive model.¹ Therefore, seventeen scholars from over a dozen countries were invited to present their work, with papers going beyond the boundaries of one specific empire. They were framed in five panels, covering a wide range of topics from geopolitics and resources to warfare and diplomacy, as well as research on race, gender, science, and anti-colonial movements in the (trans)-imperial context.

The keynote speech was held by JANE BURBANK (New York University) and added a compelling edge to the questions asked by the organizers. She filled the aforementioned trinity of trans-imperial coverage, namely connectivity, cooperation, and competition, with life by coming up with her own three

„c’s“, including „Clubs“, „Clouds“, and „Curtains“. In doing so, she gave insights on a practical level to the question of how a future trans-imperial history could look: Who are the people that were involved in trans-imperial networks and associations (clubs)? What information was shared and gathered together across imperial space (clouds)? And what are the limits of knowledge transfer and knowledge control in terms of trans-imperial interaction (curtains)?

By gathering scholars with multiple regional and local expertise, the workshop offered a platform in order to answer these questions. In this regard, the contributions provided not only a good sense of what a trans-imperial approach could be, but also a deeper understanding of what is missed out or neglected in current historical research on empires.

One point that many contributions made was that we cannot separate connections, competition and cooperation in our analysis, but instead they go hand in hand. Take for example COREY ROSS' (Birmingham University) paper on imperial nature protection in the tropics, in which he was showing to what extent the European empires worked together in the early twentieth century to keep alive in their colonies that which they had lost at home over the course of the industrial age, an „unspoiled landscape“. What is interesting is how those mechanisms that allowed the European powers to take control over their colonies under the pretext of nature preservation are still intact today. In this reading, nature protection is another trope for the *mission civilisatrice*, negotiated through trans-imperial cooperation, and continued in the politics of today's nature associations like IUCN or WWF. Ross, therefore, unfolded a fundamental critique in his paper against elitist decision making where the needs of local people are subjected to global standards.

Almost the same could be said in regard to OZAN OZAVCI's (Utrecht University/School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences Paris) paper on imperial security culture in

¹ Daniel Hedinger, Nadin Heé and Satoshi Mizutani, In-Between Empires: Trans-imperial History in a Global Age, hsozkult.de, <http://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-33307> (12.02.2018).

the nineteenth century. Here as well, the European powers acting like a „club“ to defend their interests that are, in case of the Syrian civil war 1860, competitive as much as cooperative. Instead of nature protection, it is security that is instrumentalized to define the different levels of civilization between the great powers of Europe and the „rest“. Ozavci outlined the establishment of a common European security culture that is indeed „global in scope“ but nonetheless „imperial in character“.

Such tacit agreements in imperial politics between the European powers could also be observed in VICTOR UKAOGO's (University of Nigeria) paper on colonial rivalries in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Despite a multitude of imperial conflicts in the race for spheres of influence, none of these conflicts led to open warfare, as if there was, in the words of Ukaogo, a „collective imperial wisdom [...] that the African hinterland [...] should only serve purposes of enriching the metropole and not as a graveyard of European adventurers and businessmen“. The paper by GEORGIO POTÌ (The American University of Rome) followed a similar but separate strand of the effect of these tacit agreements. In his research on anti-colonial movements in Egypt and Libya in the aftermath of the First World War, he showed how the European powers collectively stood together to maintain the imperial system against the background of upcoming „national self-determination“, adding a fresh angle to the literature on anti-imperial movements.²

Other contributions focused more on the question how „empire writes back“.³ MICHAEL TALBOT (University of Greenwich) showed in his paper on anti-colonial resistance in Southeast Asia how the cooperative nature of European imperialism could be subverted by criticism from the margins. Here, the historical actors are not the colonized, but instead it is the Ottoman Empire that comes into effect as an imperial antagonist to European hegemony and its inherent double standards in terms of equality, civilization, and legal rights. The West as a „hyperreal“⁴ entity for comparison was also the topic in SHEFALI CHANDRA's

(Washington University, St. Louis) contribution to the workshop. She rendered the usage of anti-American rhetoric by the Indian intellectual Kanhaiya Lal Gauba in his 1929's work, „Uncle Sham“.⁵ Gauba instrumentalized white women's sexuality as a cautionary tale for Western decline to strengthen his own cultural endeavors concerning cast hierarchies and Indian chastity. Therefore, as Chandra concluded, „it was the Indian caste project that needed empire“ to validate itself through comparison and distinction against European hegemony. To the field of „empires writing back“, SATOSHI MIZUTANI (Doshisha University) made a very fruitful theoretical intervention in his contribution on „Indian anti-colonialism in trans-imperial interactions“ as he revamped Ann Laura Stoler's concept of „politics of comparison“⁶ into his own questioning of „anti-colonial politics of comparison“.

A couple of contributions used trans-imperial approaches to propose new readings of common historiographic narratives. DANIEL HEDINGER's (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich/German Historical Institute Rome) paper on „the Second World War in Trans-Imperial Perspective“ interrogated the potency of trans-imperial analyses in showing how the history of the Second World War was nationalized in its aftermath and therefore, to what degree a trans-imperial perspective is useful to rectify those false accounts. ROTEM KOWNER (Hebrew University) provided a general investigation of race and empire and their mutual overlaps from the age of discovery to the modern times. NADIN HEÉ (Free University Berlin/Max Planck Institute for the History of Science), in her contribution on

²Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford 2007.

³Bill Ashcroft/ Gareth Griffiths/ Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, London 1989.

⁴Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Oxford 2008.

⁵Kanhaiya Lal Gauba, *Uncle Sham: Being a Strange Tale of a Civilization run Amok*, Lahore 1929.

⁶Ann Laura Stoler, *Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies*, in: *The Journal of American History* 88/3 (2001), pp. 829-65.

„Ocean Regimes In-Between Empires“, called for a new adjustment of empire historiography in general. Exemplified in the persistence of the Japanese maritime empire throughout the 20th century, Heé challenged established narratives of empire building, resource imperialism and maritime empires insofar as she utilized the trans-imperial approach to include the pelagic dimension of oceans and focused rather on fish than seeing oceans as inter-imperial spaces connecting empires through trade and traveling goods. For her, both liminal actors steered by migratory fish and knowledge politics were involved in maintaining Japan's supremacy in Pacific waters.

Various papers with a special focus on both liminal actors and migrating knowledge showed how clubs, clouds and curtains interplayed in specific contexts, as elaborated in DAVID M. POMFRET's (The University of Hong Kong) contribution on vagrant („beachcomber“) youth in French- and British-ruled Asia, for example, in which he questioned the comparative flatness of transnational history in order to advocate the more inclusive design of the trans-imperial framework. DAQING YANG (George Washington University), on the other hand, illustrated the mutual accumulation of knowledge on subterranean resources in Manchuria among geologists from all over the world, questioning the mere competitive nature of imperialism. The same can be said about the contribution by VICTOR M. STOLL (Free University Berlin/Cambridge University), who unfolded a political thriller in Australia concerning the scientific achievements of the Austro-German ethnologist Richard Thunwald, arguing for a more sophisticated assessment of the interwar period and its imperial entanglements and bringing up the concept of sub-imperialism. NICHOLAS B. MILLER (Institute of Social Science University of Lisbon) traced back the flows of organized contract labour migration from Hong Kong to Hawaii, showing the upcoming interconnectedness of a global capitalist market in the trans-imperial space. SAMUËL COGHE's (Giessen University) paper dealt with the recapitulation of Portuguese endeavors in keeping up with European standards of colonial medicine in

Africa, illustrating the preposterous side effects of European imperial rivalry. AMELIA BONEA's (Oxford University) paper followed the footsteps of the Indian chemist Ruchi Ram Sahni, who left for Europe to gain new self-confidence in an international scientific community provided by a trans-imperial environment that not only allowed him to strengthen his academic profile, but also to lean against British rule in colonial India.

In the final discussion, participants came back to the overall question of the advantages and pitfalls of a trans-imperial approach. They agreed that it is precisely the „multiplication of perspectives on empire“ that makes the difference. In emphasizing the different layers of historiographical inquiry, the trans-imperial approach provides us with the opportunity to go „beyond“ the traditional narratives of competing empires, while at the same time, it lets us step in „between“ the narration itself to investigate the causalities, transformations, and distortions of empire's everyday life in more detail. In this context, some claimed that it was necessary to go beyond the workshop chronologies by more systematically including the time before 1850 or even the early modern, as well as the phase of de-colonization after 1950. In doing so, in the words of Burbank, the „trans-imperial approach both enlarges and enlivens our historical narratives“. However, critical voices remarked that the goal cannot be to only add diversity. Both the advantage and challenge of the trans-imperial approach lies in overcoming common narratives, or focusing on single nations or empires rather than thinking of them together. The contributions of this workshop stressed that the trans-imperial approach seeks to counternarrate the established patterns of Western historiography. It is a political program insofar as it scrutinizes the European imperial hegemony and its post-colonial legacies, it interrogates our understanding of what an empire is, and breaks up the imperial closets of East and West, looking from beneath rather than from the imperial entities themselves. In this regard, it actually is sometimes necessary to come up with a new terminology, even if it is just for the purpose of being different to make a point that something is missing. Thus, trans-imperial

history has the potential to contribute to the booming field of global history, going beyond mere „globish“ talk of interconnectedness, which has been criticized as a feature of recent global historical approaches.⁷ It seems to be a promising new field that is emerging, and even if there is still a long way to go, international scholarly networks going beyond the workshop are in the making.⁸

Conference Overview:

Welcome Address

Daniel Hedinger (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich/German Historical Institute Rome), Nadin Heé (Free University Berlin/Max Planck Institute for the History of Science), Satoshi Mizutani (Doshisha University)

Panel I: Geopolitics & Resources

Commentator: Martin Dusinberre (University of Zurich)

Daqing Yang (George Washington University): Subterranean Knowledge in Trans-Imperial History: Manchurian Resources in Geoscience and Geopolitics

Nadin Heé (Free University Berlin/Max Planck Institute for the History of Science): Liminal Actors and Knowledge Politics: Creating Ocean Regimes In-Between Empires

Corey Ross (Birmingham University): Conservation beyond Borders: Environmental Management in Europe's Tropical Colonies

Panel II: Warfare & Diplomacy

Commentator: Alexander Korb (University of Leicester)

Ozan Ozavci (Utrecht University/School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences Paris): Imperial Security Culture in the Nineteenth Century: The Druze-Maronite Civil War and the European Commission on Syria, 1860-62

Daniel Hedinger (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich/German Historical Institute Rome): Beyond the Master Narrative? The Second World War in Trans-Imperial Perspective

Viktor Ukaogo (University of Nigeria): Trans-Imperial Rivalries: Exploring Fresh Dimen-

sions to 'Cordial Confrontations' and Masked Competitions in Africa

Panel III: Resistance & Anti-Imperialism

Commentator: Jonas Kreienbaum (Rostock University)

Georgio Potì (The American University of Rome): Pushing Anti-Colonial Nationalism in the Trans-Imperial Space: Egyptian and Libyan Petitions to France (1918-1924)

Michael Talbot (University of Greenwich): Resistance, Equality, Civilization: Ottoman Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism in Southeast Asia in the Later Nineteenth Century

Satoshi Mizutani (Doshisha University): Indian Anti-Colonialism in Trans-Imperial Interactions: Tagore, R. B. Bose and their Politics of Comparison over Japanese Colonialism in Korea

Keynote Speech

Jane Burbank (New York University): Imperial Context: Clubs, Clouds, and Curtains

Panel IV: Race & Social Control

Commentator: Eva Marlene Hausteiner (University of Bonn) & Andreas Weiß (GEI Braunschweig)

Viktor Stoll (Free University Berlin/Cambridge University): 'The Future of the Territory depends on the Welfare of the Natives': German Colonial Knowledge and the Transformation of Australian Sub-Imperialism, 1920-1923

David M. Pomfret (The University of Hong Kong): 'Curse of the Community': Beachcomber Youth in British and French Asia

Nicholas B. Miller (Institute of Social Science University of Lisbon): Migrant Labour Policies and Mobile Policymaking: Dr. Hillebrand and his Macau-Hawaii-Surinam Nexus, 1840-1880

Shefali Chandra (Washington University, St. Louis): Racing Between Empire: India, Britain and the US

⁷Jeremy Adelman, What is Global History now?, aeon.co, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> (12.02.2018).

⁸Studies in Trans-Imperial Histories, <https://trans-imperial.site> (12.02.2018).

Rotem Kowner (Hebrew University): The Lowest Common Denominator: The Role of Race in Empires of the Global Age

Panel V: Science & Technology

Commentator: Iris Schröder (University of Erfurt)

Samuël Coghe (Giessen University): Hierarchies of Prestige and the Tensions of Trans-Imperial History

Amelia Bonea (Oxford University): Radioactivity, Networks of Science and Knowledge Making between Asia and Europe, c. 1900-1920

Plenary Discussion

Tagungsbericht *In-Between Empires: Trans-imperial History in a Global Age*. 15.09.2017–16.09.2017, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 19.02.2018.