

Comparing Colonialism: Beyond European Exceptionalism

Veranstalter: Axel T. Paul / Matthias Leanza, University of Basel

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Colonial expansion seems to be a common, nearly universal phenomenon in human history. At the same time, colonialism comes in many varieties, and too often it has been understood solely through the concept of European colonialism. This, as laid out in the conference's introductory remarks by AXEL T. PAUL (Basel), was the background to the conference, which sought not only to de-centre, but also move beyond modern European colonial empires, both spatially and temporally. Paul started by pointing to a number of characteristics which might be specific to modern European ones, among them the fact that they arose out of competition between great powers, that they created a first global economy, and that empire-building simultaneously fostered the nation-state. He then went on to enumerate some aspects which might be universal to all empires. Empires do not seem to strive for cultural homogeneity, but mainly for the loyalty of their subjects. In this context, he asked whether 'othering' was a common imperial feature, whether empires needed a certain 'imperial idea' and what role racism played in them. He identified a further commonality in the expansionary character of empires: they rarely have clearly demarcated borders, and, up to a certain point, it is expansion, which fuels their power.

In the keynote held on the evening before, WOLFGANG REINHARD (Freiburg) had also sought to provide a framework for the conference's engagement with colonialism. Under the heading 'Agency, cooperation, oligarchy' he identified three main developments in the workings of Western imperial expansion and colonialism. With the case of the Spanish Empire in the Americas as main illustration, he argued that empires generally result from the initial agency of individuals (men like Hernán Cortés), who also pur-

sue economic interests. To sustain their conquests, it is then necessary to seek cooperation with indigenous elites. In the end, Reinhard argued, Western colonialism was a 'system of alliances' in which an oligarchy of collaborating elites ruled at the expense of the subalterns.

Over the next two days, historians, sociologists and political scientists came together in interdisciplinary dialogue to discuss the phenomenon of colonialism from the viewpoint of different historical ages and empires.

MARTIN MAUERSBERG (Innsbruck), who replaced Hans-Joachim Gehrke at short notice, spoke of Ancient Greek and Roman colonisation. For the Greeks, who did not speak of 'colonies' but of *apokeia*, the latter were essentially 'settlements away from home', one of the distinctions with modern colonies being that the Greek ones started as population settlements and only then expanded (instead of the other way round). The Roman colonies on the other hand were established within conquered territories, and linked to the concept of the farmer-soldier, often serving as settlements of veterans or even military outposts. Othering was not outspoken in the early Greek and Roman world but was fostered by the (hostile) contact with certain groups (Persians or Gauls and Germans), though Rome was also to develop a highly integrative notion of citizenship.

ROBERT HOYLAND (New York) then moved to the Arab Muslim conquest of the Middle East. The Arab conquerors established a substantial number of garrisons of settler-soldiers in their new territories, which were paid for by local taxes. Also, there was a certain degree of social and legal othering. An important difference with modern European colonialism, however, was the large-scale integration of the conquered into the conquest society via conversion. More importantly, as Islam was still in its early development, those who converted were able to contribute parts of their own culture to Islamic culture; Arab conquest thus had a much more syncretic and integrated dimension.

JAMES REILLY (Toronto) stayed in the Middle East, but instead asked whether the Ottoman conquest there could be considered colonial. Reilly answered that it was certainly

imperial but not colonial; the dichotomy of coloniser and colonised was not part of the theory and practice of Ottoman rule and its officials developed local roots, becoming 'local Ottomans'.

TANJA BÜHRER (Bern) then presented an entangled history of the French and British 'Imperial nation-states' c. 1770-1850. She argued that nation-building and imperial expansion fed into each other, both being shaped by inter-cultural encounters. She presented the example of the establishment of British East India Company rule on the Indian subcontinent. Company officials who returned to the metropole after having made a fortune overseas generated metropolitan anxieties over supposedly being corrupted by 'Oriental' modes of governance and threatening social order and privilege. This led to anti-corruption reforms for Company officials and a rationalisation of their bureaucracy, which in turn also impacted state-building in Britain.

The presentation by FRANCESCA FUOLI (Bern), which looked at the British-India/Afghanistan frontier between 1857-1900, related mainly to another aspect of empires which had been identified earlier by Axel T. Paul: the role played by unceasing expansion. The British Empire, contrary to its practice elsewhere, defied modern notions of sovereignty and territoriality on the Afghanistan frontier, consciously applying blurred notions of sovereignty in order to leave the way open for a further expansion of influence as long as British policymakers remained undecided as to the exact relation of dependency in which Afghanistan was to stand.

The next presentations considered the internal structures of colonialism. KLAUS SCHLICHTE (Bremen) first presented the case of British colonialism in the Uganda Protectorate. Following several stages of state development in Uganda, he argued that many of the main structures, such as the economic base of rule, remained largely untouched from pre- to post-colonial times. He presented some lessons from this case for comparing colonialism in general, among which were to pay more attention to forms of market integration of economies as well as to pre-colonial structures. MATTHIAS LEANZA (Basel) on

the next day spoke of the structures of settler colonialism in German South West Africa. Engaging with the debate in the field whether settler colonialism and its large-scale elimination of indigenous populations is to be considered a 'structure' or an 'event', he actually pleaded for seeing it as a process, and thereby to radically temporalise structures. Showing how colonialism in the area passed through several stages, with a settler and a military frontier constantly shifting, he concluded that it will be useful to look at such historical trajectories and thereby building more fine-grained classifications.

As the presentations by Yael Berda and Janne Lahti unfortunately had to be cancelled, the conference moved forward with MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY's (Chicago) analysis of Russia's colonialism in comparative perspective. He argued that, consistently, there were two important distinctions between Russian colonialism over the centuries and the Western equivalent. First, instead of following private enterprise, the state had an unprecedented role as driver of Russian colonialism. The second distinction was the denial of the colonial nature of its empire, both by Russian institutions and thinkers, even though that did not correspond to reality from the sixteenth century onwards. This denial was only twice briefly broken, first at the turn of the twentieth century by some cautious voices, especially from officials familiar with Russian-ruled Central Asia who dared to use the word, and secondly briefly by Russian historiography in the 1990s.

In the conference's last session, JIN-KYUNG PARK (Seoul) first spoke about Japanese imperial rule in Korea, more specifically the discussion of the so-called 'population problem' in the interwar period. Japanese thinkers and the state in this period generally believed that Japan's surplus population had to be transplanted overseas, while at the same time they also followed a strongly pro-natalist policy in Korea. This interwar discussion has generally been interpreted as a biopolitical one, but Park said this does not fit with what she found in the archival record. Tracing the semantic and intellectual origins of concepts such as 'population' and 'statistics' in Japan and Korea, and the influence of foreign,

mainly German publications, she concluded that it is better understood as a geopolitical problem: the Japanese empire came to think of the Korean population mainly as a human resource in a geopolitical struggle.

The conference ended with KRISHAN KUMAR's (Virginia) conceptual thoughts on 'imperialism' and 'colonialism'. He explored the linguistic origins of these concepts, their shifts in meaning over time, and their analytical uses. While the comparability of 'empires' and 'imperialism' seemed little disputed as the terms were generally also applied to both non-Western and pre-Roman polities, this was more difficult for colonialism. Here Kumar discussed Moses Finley's 1976 attempted typology of colonies. For Finley, colonies were a modern, Western phenomenon, which always involved a plantation of people and a relationship of dependency between the colony and the motherland. Kumar thought this definition overly narrow, as it would exclude much of what is generally considered colonialism (such as in most of sub-Saharan Africa) and would also leave out such phenomena as internal colonisation. While leaving open which definition was to replace it, Kumar concluded that Finley's typology provided more losses than gains.

Thus ended a conference which was exceptional in the broad spectrum of subjects covered, be it in terms of time, geography or academic discipline. The reviewer felt this worked well, and that there really was a debate beyond the boundaries of the different fields. Most presentations also – and this is not always a given at conferences – really engaged with the conference's main question, which facilitated this process a lot. And while the conference did not put forward one authoritative definition of 'colonialism' (that could hardly be expected), and it sometimes remained unclear whether participants were speaking more about empire/imperialism or colonialism, it nevertheless showed that the concept can work as a useful basis of comparing sometimes very different polities.

It was probably on the point of conceptualisation that the conference could have done better. There was a strong focus on Moses Finley's attempted typology of colonies, which

was discussed not only in Kumar's final presentation but also in several others. While this was apparently by accident (and partly reflects the fact that despite the wealth of scholarship on colonies and colonialism there have been surprisingly few attempts at conceptualising them), some more conceptual diversity would have been fruitful. I am thinking here, for instance, of the work of Jürgen Osterhammel and D.K. Fieldhouse, which was mentioned only occasionally and then often only in the discussion.

Nevertheless, this was only a small flaw to an otherwise very diverse conference, which succeeded very well in its proclaimed aims of uncovering both common features of colonialism as well as examining the unique characteristics of its Western form. As a follow-up, the organisers have planned the publication of a special issue, which aims to include an even larger spectrum of empires – something which can only be encouraged.

Conference overview:

Keynote:

Wolfgang Reinhard (Freiburg): „Agency, cooperation and oligarchy“

Introduction:

Axel T. Paul (Basel): „Comparing colonialism: introductory remarks“

Martin Mauersberg (Innsbruck): „Of archetypes and special cases. Colonisation in Greek and Roman Antiquity“

Robert Hoyland (New York): „Were the Muslim Arabs who conquered the Middle East colonialists?“

James Reilly (Toronto): „Ottomans in Syria: „Turkish colonialism“ or something else?“

Tanja Bühner (Bern): „An entangled history of the British and French „Imperial nation-states“ in the Age of Revolutions, c. 1770-1850“

Francesca Fuoli (Bern): „Colonialism at the fringes of Empire: reassessing Afghanistan's place in British colonial history, 1857-1900“

Klaus Schlichte (Bremen), „Contradictions of British colonialism in the Uganda Protectorate“

Matthias Leanza (Basel), „Imperial trajectories: the constant remaking of German rule in South West Africa“

Yael Berda (Jerusalem), „Bureaucratic tools of emergency and citizenship in the colonial past and present: Israel/Palestine and India“ – CANCELLED

Janne Lahti (Helsinki), „Indigenous settler colonialism? Rethinking Comanche, Lakota and Apache expansions in North America“ – CANCELLED

Michael Khodarkovsky (Chicago), „Where Russia was ‘ahead’ of Europe: Russia’s state colonialism in comparative perspective“

Jin-kyung Park (Seoul), „Japanese colonialism and the geopolitics of population, race and nation in Korean imagination“

Krishan Kumar (Virginia), „Imperialism and colonialism: a meaningful distinction?“

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