

Editorial

The topic of empire continues to keep the social sciences at large busy. After it had seemed for a long time as if the topic had definitely been handed over to historians, who are concerned with a past phenomenon that only occurs as a nostalgic reflex in the present, empires are suddenly also of interest again to the social scientists concerned with the present under quite different aspects. The question of whether the United States was and still is an empire and whether such imperial configurations were needed to maintain an international order after the multilateralism of the Cold War had come to an end played a crucial role in relaunching the debate about empires. A second layer of interest was informed by postcolonially inspired interest in the continuing mechanisms of earlier colonial empires now striking back in various ways and thus remaining present in today's seemingly post-imperial world. At a third level, observations that view empires as a rather loose association of rule with unfinished territorialization came to the fore in interpretations of empire as a more appropriate form of governance under conditions of global or at least transregional weakening or even dissolution of boundaries.

While we recently looked back at the similarities and differences between empires for the historical period from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries in a historically comparative thematic issue of this journal (no 3/2019), the current double issue, conceived from the perspective of historical sociology, is concerned with a geographically even broader comparison that seeks to revise the thesis of a European exceptionalism in the history of colonialism and imperialism that is often put forward implicitly rather than explicitly. This makes it necessary, first of all, to look for colonial imperial expansion also outside Europe and not to construct a “non-European world” as the target of expansion, as an overseas history, now out of fashion, did for a long time. This means not only to question the geography of comparative studies of empires, but also to reflect critically on their privileged time frame and to include examples that lie beyond the particular European expansion period that is often portrayed as starting in the fifteenth century. In

a third level, the nesting of empires is at stake, because the confrontation with imperial conquest from outside by no means put an end to state-building processes inside the imperially overformed regions, from which a whole complex of new questions about the relationship of the various empire-building processes can be derived.

Colonialism, in this perspective, is not a relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans, but a much broader, almost universal kaleidoscope of subjugation, settlement into regions other than the one of origin, and arrangements between external and internal elites. What distinguishes pre-modern forms of imperial rule and colony-building from those since the late eighteenth century, however, are (1) their positioning in struggles for dominance at a global scale, (2) the complicated blending between the formation of nation-states and ongoing attempts at imperial expansion, which can by no means be reduced to a teleology from empire to nation, and (3) the relationship between capitalist adventurism and political projects of empire building, which follow different logics but always interact.

To abstract these processes in such a way that they can be made available as theoretical elements to other disciplines requires at the same time a wide range of expertise for many case studies, an important selection of which is brought together in this issue. Specialists will read these case studies as enriching knowledge about individual empires, while the thematic issue as a whole, not least with its introduction by the editors and its afterword by Frederick Cooper, pursues an ambition that goes beyond the individual case and at the same time offers a broadening of perspective beyond meticulously deconstructed European exceptionalism and a contribution to a general theory of empires.

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