

Transimperial Opportunities? Transcending the Nation in Imperial Formations

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At the end of February 2022, the world faced Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a war for empire.¹ Instantly, in the arena of international diplomacy and politics, the action was widely framed as an act of imperial expansion.² Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US-American ambassador to the United Nations, criticized it as an antiquated act of recreating the Russian Empire: "Putin wants the world to travel back in time. To a time before the United Nations. To a time when empires ruled the world", she said. "But the rest of the world has moved forward. It is not 1919. It is 2022", the ambassador claimed.³

In 2006, Ann Laura Stoler recognized an increasing acceptance in public discourse to declare states as empires and multiple acts of empowerment or expansionism as imperialism.⁴ Regardless of their political stance, politicians seem to share a belief in the political usefulness of evocating the term empire. At the same time, Empire Studies have been *en vogue* in historiography for quite some time. But today, we face the first large-scale attempt to revive an empire in Europe since World War II. From a historian's perspective, it evokes the desire to offer fine-grained explanations of the complex entanglements be-

1 Putin's attempts to restore Russia's empire have a history, see e.g. C. Shinar, Vladimir Putin's Aspiration to Restore the Lost Russian Empire, in: *European Review* 25 (2017) 4, pp. 642–654.

2 See, for instance, K. Giles, "Putin's speech harked back to Russia's Empire – the threat doesn't stop at Ukraine", 2022-2-22, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/22/putin-speech-russia-empire-threat-ukraine-moscow> (accessed 22 February 2022).

3 Quoted in R. Gladstone, "The U.S. and other nations blast Russia at an emergency U.N. Security Council meeting", 2022-2-21, *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/21/world/ukraine-russia-putin-biden/ukraine-seeks-an-emergency-meeting-of-the-un-security-council> (accessed 21 February 2022).

4 A. L. Stoler, *On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty*, in: *Public Culture* 18 (2006) 1, pp. 125–146.

tween empire-building, territorialization, and the creation of national borders in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century, as today's politics reflect its afterlife.

This thematic issue echoes the call by Bernhard Schär for a “renewed new imperial history” that explains how Europe emerged out of connections across the boundaries of national empires and offers empirical insights into what such histories look like.⁵ It is anchored in the growing literature that aims at overcoming intra-imperial approaches and that decentre empire studies through what has been dubbed a transimperial perspective.⁶ The contributors extended this call to include marginalized empires towards actors at the margins of national empires, such as Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, and Denmark, exploring how they contributed to the making of Imperial Europe. By so doing, they provide an empirical basis within the stimulating new framework of “colonialism without colonies”⁷ – a concept that hopefully provokes new outcomes in the ongoing discussion within *New Imperial History* on what empire and imperialism are supposed to mean and how we should define them. Amid an ever-growing assemblage of theorizing various types and forms of empires – ranging from “informal empires”, “nation-empires”, “territorial empires” to “archipelagic empires” or “pelagic empires”, to name just a few –, it makes sense to reflect on scales and degrees of imperial sovereignty and remind ourselves that what imperial formations have in common is the permeability of their borders, in material, legal, or ideological terms.⁸

The articles in this issue aim at contributing to a history of knowledge from a transimperial perspective. They build on the growing literature dealing with go-betweens and brokers from nations lacking a formal empire (or with only short-lived ones) of their own. Thereby transimperial webs of knowledge, training regimes, and expert mobilities from what are called actors “at the margins” are brought to the forefront. Multiple actors seized the opportunity presented by other imperial systems to shape colonial archives while collecting knowledge and artefacts.⁹ One of the insights I took away from the case studies is the ambivalent facets of these opportunities. The contributions make clear that the careers of these “outsiders” have been contested and full of frictions on the one hand, but on the other hand offered opportunities within their nations. Finally, the transimperial engagements leveraged both economic and social capital on an individual level.

In this afterword, I first aim at extrapolating a couple of conditions that enabled those “outsiders” to contribute to and participate (to a certain extent) in the formation of imperial knowledge regimes. Second, I will contemplate what they had in common when producing transimperial knowledge. Finally, I briefly touch on the broader question of

5 B. C. Schär, Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies: Towards a New Imperial History of Europe, c. 1770–1850, in: Past & Present (2022) (currently online only).

6 D. Hedinger / N. Heé, Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition, in: Journal of Modern European History 16 (2018) 4, pp. 429–452.

7 See, for instance, P. Purtschert / H. Fischer-Tiné, Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins, Basingstoke 2015.

8 On imperial formations, see A. L. Stoler / C. McGranahan / P. C. Perdue (eds.), Imperial Formations, Santa Fe 2007.

9 See, for instance, M. von Briesius, German Science in the Age of Empire: Enterprise, Opportunity and the Schlagintweit Brothers, Cambridge 2019.

commensurability in empire studies to reflect on the future potential for a transimperial history of knowledge.

1. Conditions of Transcending the Nation in Transimperial Formations

First, I aim to sketch crucial structural conditions that explain why and how actors from the margins of European empires participated in transimperial knowledge production, as imperial knowledge economies simultaneously shaped them.¹⁰ An underlying condition of transimperial cooperation is what I would like to call an empire-nation nexus. The underlying structural logic of the transimperial alliances outlined here lies in “colonialism without colonies”. In this sense, the imperial service of actors from nations without colonies was part and parcel of “multi-empire services and resource zones”.¹¹ European empires relied on expertise, labour, or capital beyond their territories to sustain imperial rule. In turn, for many actors in emerging nation-states, “foreign empires” offered opportunities in various ways. Beyond individual economic capital, the transimperial entanglements that resulted from such opportunities reinforced formations of nations, transcending the dichotomy of metropole-colony connections – the one-dimensional links a lot of research still concentrates on.

The nexus between transimperial networks and shared visions of producing Indological knowledge informed Swiss national identity formations, as demonstrated in Claire Louise Blaser’s original contribution to this issue. She shows convincingly that in comparative historical linguistics, the disciplines of Indology and Swiss German dialectology are sites where Swiss national identity construction reflects broader European discourses about the world as seen through an imperial gaze. The case of the tropical agronomic expert Ernst Fickendey analysed in the sophisticated co-authored piece by Moritz von Brescius and Christof Dejung shows how technocratic visions, shared by multiple empires, converted and even conflated with German National Socialism during his transimperial career, which crossed the territories of numerous empires and nation-states. Furthermore, in her fascinating study, Pernille Røge demonstrates how European abolitionism was an inherent part of the age of imperial revolutions that straddled the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in which older modes of European empire-making eroded and new forms emerged in parallel with the rise of the nation-state. It is important to note that the empire-nation nexus is both a temporal and a spatial one. The two reinforce each other in parallel, while they are contested both on the level of imaginaries and physical borders.

A second crucial structural precondition for opportunities in cross-border careering that comes out in this issue are middle-class (and upper-class) personal networks that enabled

10 On the importance of global conditions in form of structures, see S. Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, Princeton 2016.

11 Schär, Switzerland.

transimperial actors to transcend the nation-state and participate in material, geopolitical, as well as cultural imperial formations and sovereignties. The contributions bring to light how actors and knowledge were embedded in “webs” and “hubs” that transcended national and intra-imperial containers.

Monique Ligtenberg’s article offers fascinating insights into the vital role anthropological “amateurs” played when it comes to the emergence of the discipline of anthropology in the nineteenth century. Ligtenberg argues that Bernhard Hagen perfectly embodies the “colonial outsider” as he relies on cooperation with multiple foreign colonial governments while transcending intra-imperial networks. He personifies the type of educated middle-class men that contributed significantly to the discipline’s institutionalization and professionalization by traveling to, writing about, and measuring so-called indigenous populations. In this vein, border-crossing networks were also crucial for the “spiritual entrepreneurs” we come across in Selander’s original study on competing theosophists.

Mentioning competing actors brings me to my third point. Ann Laura Stoler described “politics of comparison” within imperial formations as an indispensable condition for transimperial webs of knowledge and cooperation. Stoler has shown that empires actively compared themselves and were not isolated. For instance, in a seemingly contradictory fashion, empires articulated their supposed uniqueness and exceptionality vis-à-vis others while simultaneously sharing up-to-date knowledge on colonial governance amongst themselves in their pan-imperial efforts to prevent disorder.¹² Within this frame, we can make sense of the ongoing struggle for opportunities we come across in all the contributions to this issue. We realize the very contingency of the extent to which networks and connections could be used and were trustful: Various agents of empires constantly compared themselves and aimed for their empire to be – and to be seen – as outstanding and essentially different from the others. At the same time, they competed with each other for experts, sailors, merchants, and various other transimperial brokers they depended on to sustain their imperial endeavours and the imperial world order.

2. Commonalities in Producing Transimperial Knowledge

The conditions for transimperial knowledge production imply commonalities among imperial formations and shared imperial agendas. Identifying commonalities and particularities between multiple empires is an ongoing research agenda within Empire Studies. In their seminal study, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper trace similarities of imperial rule in Eurasian history while pointing to particularities.¹³ The questions at stake here are related to the empire-nation nexus mentioned before: What commonalities in transimperial knowledge production can we identify when moving away from national

12 A. L. Stoler, *Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies*, in: *The Journal of American History* 88 (2001) 3, pp. 829–865.

13 J. Burbank/F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton 2011.

empires as the unit of analysis? Are there patterns and modes of knowing that the actors involved have in common? What is deemed authoritative knowledge in this context? And are there common paradigms underlying knowing practices?

The examined actors from European nations without empires (or with short-lived ones) adhered to a consensus of useful knowledge. They respected the authority of particular forms of knowledge emerging within knowledge regimes of imperial formations. To sharpen our understanding of hierarchization and the formation of authoritative knowledge, it is helpful to move away from an inter-imperial comparison between two entities and the dichotomy of the categories local and global. To establish authoritative knowledge within various areas at stake for imperial formations, not just inter-imperial competition, but also politics of comparison between multiple actors, not simply belonging to one empire or nation, were the framework of knowing practices. The use and application of knowledge were the most decisive factor in hierarchizing knowledge.

This hierarchizing process is particularly explicitly articulated regarding agricultural science and techniques. The patent system in the field was steered by imperial competition while being a transimperial vector for transmitting knowledge. It is also very prominent when we remind ourselves of the competing theories among theosophists forming in a transimperial setting. Another example within this issue is anthropological museums and individual anthropologists fighting for artefacts to succeed in the competition within the discipline and get funding among entrepreneurs.

The hierarchization of knowledge and the emergence of authoritative forms of knowledge were enabled by particular paradigms, or *Denkkollektive*, as Ludwik Fleck has dubbed it. The term describes a community that shares knowledge cultures and frameworks of values that reflect its members' socio-economic backgrounds – as for instance in the case of the abolitionist movement and its transimperial entanglements. The two protagonists in that case study, Wadström and Isert, acted within the paradigm of a transimperial discourse centred on relocating the production of sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo to Africa to avoid the African slave trade and plantation slavery without giving up access to these resources. Similarly, one could argue that the Swiss Indologists shared the paradigm of Indological “facts” and patterns of knowledge production within the discipline with their colleagues in European national empires.

In other words, what many of the actors transcending national borders for a transimperial career had in common was a particular “moral economy”. Lorraine Daston examines three examples of how moral economies have structured critical aspects of how scientists come to know: quantification, empiricism, and objectivity.¹⁴ In the transimperial knowledge production covered here, we can certainly see an overlap of them. Still, in terms of scale, empiricism seems to apply broadly to the cases in this issue. For Daston, the emergence of a new understanding of experience in natural philosophy in the seventeenth century was critical.¹⁵ It is not essential to trace back the genealogies of empiricism for

14 L. Daston, *The Moral Economy of Science*, in: *Osiris* 10 (1995), pp. 2–24.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

our purposes. When it comes to the forms of knowledge that are authoritative across empires, what is striking is how much empiricism, individual observations, and the individual use of all senses and factuality are weighted. So we can see an epistemology of embodied knowledge as one of the knowing patterns.

The authority of empiricism offers countless opportunities for actors transcending the nation to add to a shared transimperial archive of knowledge. For them, their individual bodily knowledge – knowledge gained through situated experience – was their symbolic capital. Particular forms of experience knowledge were attracting multiple empires. They paid off for the actors in the form of economic resources, transimperial careers, and in many cases, national reputation on the individual level. Moreover, the value of specific forms of knowledge as a financial resource was mutually reinforced with symbolic capital, a term famously coined by Pierre Bourdieu and connected to this, materiality matters. For Bourdieu, objects or sites possess symbolic capital. Still, they can also be a resource and become converted by individuals into leveraging advantage in political and social spheres proliferated by prestige and honour.¹⁶ In this sense, multiple artefacts, but also particular sites, were part of a value creation chain based on symbolic capital. The importance of materiality in knowing processes and their materialized symbolic capital is reflected in collections, objects, and non-human species movements across empires. The anthropological museum in Frankfurt certainly is an outstanding example of a place where symbolic capital materialized. At the same time, its founder capitalized on the transimperial flow of objects, knowledge, and people that were the basis for its creation. The very materiality and texture of the soil in a particular environment, the plantation as a means to produce commodities, played a crucial role in the production of experimental knowledge. On top of this, the production of knowledge about the fertility of imperial territories was reinforced through material devices, often in the form of specific technology and agricultural instruments. We come across this nexus in the cases of Waldström, Isert, or Fickendey. Although the connotation was different, Sweden was considered fertile soil to disseminate spiritual messages by go-betweens due to its geographical and cultural situatedness.

The historical actors in this thematic issue share the “situatedness of knowledge”¹⁷ as another commonality. Even for the production of Swiss Indological knowledge, it mattered that the scholars were physically participating in international conferences. This reminds us that imperial knowledge does not just float in between empires. Still, its production is situated and then disperses through various channels, but often not equally and globally. Moreover, as Jonas Kreienbaum and Christoph Kamissek have demonstrated with their metaphor of the imperial cloud,¹⁸ we must keep in mind that we are not dealing with one archive or static knowledge stored in a fixed place like a library, but that the archive

16 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London 2010.

17 D. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988) 3, pp. 575–599.

18 C. Kamissek/J. Kreienbaum, *An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge*, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 14 (2016) 2, pp. 164–182.

is constantly transforming and adapting. Knowledge as symbolic capital or knowledge paradigms are commonalities among actors from nations without empires. Other transimperial actors who do not come from nations without colonies but are go-betweens from different imperial “margins”, for instance those within the territorial space of empires, have this in common with the protagonists that are the focus of this issue.

3. Commensurability in-between Empires and Opportunities for Transimperial Histories of Knowledge

That said, the question arises of whether the investigation of this group of actors results primarily in particularities or if we can gain some insights regarding the broader question of the commensurability of empires. Granted, this is a susceptible question. As Satoshi Mizutani has shown, imperial formations do constantly transform and reshape regarding their spatial and temporal dimensions.¹⁹ I think a transimperial approach and the inclusion of various “marginal” actors from different imperial settings, be it those in this thematic issue, others from European national empires, or Empires like the Japanese or American, certainly can give valuable insights in this regard. They help us move outside the box of intra-empire definitions and commensurabilities and point to the particularities within single empires. They encourage us to look closer at the intra-empire level of various empires. Knowledge production within single empires such as the French, British, or the Japanese differed depending on the location within the imperial territories. It depended on the sites and colonies within each empire, while some paradigms were shared across their borders. Geographies mattered. Knowledge economies and production differed among the colonies within a single empire, for instance, in French Indochina and French colonies in Africa or Taiwan and Korea under Japanese rule.

The actors in this volume saw themselves as part of a “middle class” and reinforced a peculiar habitus, representative of the social status they aimed at sustaining or achieving. More generally, this evokes questions regarding the relationship between hierarchies, class, and knowledge production and how far we must define different commonalities, particularities, and frictions in terms of mobilities, for instance, for other go-betweens at the “margins” of empires. So one wonders whether low-class mobilities and knowledges produced within a transimperial framework would create different forms of knowledge and create various archives.

Overall, I think we are at a consequential juncture in histories of knowledge. There is an impasse generated by, on the one hand, the challenge-and-riposte structure between abstract universalizing frameworks and, on the other, an epistemology-centred version of negative dialectics that key strands of postcolonial theory forged. Transimperial approaches could contribute to not simply deconstructing existing master narratives and

19 S. Mizutani, Introduction to “Beyond Comparison: Japan and Its Colonial Empire in Transimperial Relations,” in: *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (2019) 32, pp. 1–21.

generating more detailed studies of micro-politics, but even overcoming negative dialectics and establishing new master narratives. The contemplations here are a stepping-stone for further research that includes a variety of transimperial actors from the “margins”. They can help us rethink various binaries and container categories such as the centre-margins conceptualization and make us aware of shifting categories and non-linear processes. Connected to this, I ask myself to what extent the actors treated here really are at the margins of shared imperial missions. While in the sense of territorial sovereignty, they indeed were at the margins, they at the same time enjoyed imperial privileges comparable to those of other European imperial agents.

The studies also provoke the question of how far other actors from imperial territories were involved in similar ways regarding imperial knowledge production and dissemination. One wonders if and how actors from “non-European” empires such as the Ottoman Empire or the Japanese Empire constituted, formed, and shared visions of European imperialism and what kind of frictions did occur in this process. In this vein, I think the inclusion of the “margins” within Imperial Europe urges us to rethink categories like local or vernacular knowledge and to what extent they are analytically useful. By so doing, this helps to bring to light the impact transimperial go-betweens had on the complex interplay of the formation of European imperialism, territorialization of nation-states, and shared “European” imperial visions. It also helps us develop a critical stance towards its afterlife – both in historiography and *Realpolitik*.