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# FORUM

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## Transimperial History: The New Global?\*

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### ABSTRACTS

Transimperial history is a vibrant emerging field that is rapidly maturing. However, for it to become a distinct approach, it requires more than just momentum; it needs its own methodology—something transimperial history is still lacking. This article proposes the *transimperial prism* as an analytic tool to address this gap. A prism refracts the seemingly uniform narratives of single empires into a spectrum of shared practices, revealing how empires were inextricably linked through connectivity, cooperation, and competition. It centers mechanisms of power over “flows” and rethinks historical directionality, rejecting teleological narratives of globalization. Addressing the question of whether transimperial history is “the new global,” we argue that it is not a replacement but a necessary complement responding to the current “crisis of the global” and the resurgence of imperial thinking.

Transimperiale Geschichte ist ein aufstrebendes Forschungsfeld. Doch fehlt es ihr bisher an einer präzisen Methodik. Dieser Artikel schlägt das „transimperiale Prisma“ als Analyseinstrument vor, um diese Lücke zu schließen. Ein Prisma bricht die scheinbar einheitlichen Narrative einzelner Imperien in ein Spektrum gemeinsamer Praktiken und zeigt, wie Imperien durch Konnektivität, Kooperation und Konkurrenz untrennbar miteinander verbunden waren. Das transimperiale Prisma stellt Machtdynamiken in den Mittelpunkt und hilft historische Direktionalität zu

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überdenken; dadurch lehnt es auch jegliche teleologische Erzählung von Globalisierung und Modernisierung ab. Auf die Frage, ob die transimperiale Geschichte „das neue Globale“ ist, antwortet dieser Artikel daher, dass sie kein Ersatz, sondern eine notwendige Ergänzung darstellt – eine Ergänzung, die auf die aktuelle „Krise des Globalen“ und das Wiederaufleben imperialen Denkens reagiert.

## Introduction

In recent years, empires have experienced a notable comeback. Since 2022, the invasion of Ukraine has reignited discussions, as Putin’s Russia openly expresses its desire “to bring back a new Age of Empire.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, in the context of China’s rise, it has become clear that imperial thinking and large-scale economic bloc building did not become obsolete with the emergence of the nation-state; rather, both forms of reasoning and practice continue to shape contemporary geopolitics.<sup>2</sup> The beginning of Trump’s second presidential term has further ensured that 2025 will be remembered as the year when the idea of the return to an “Age of Empire” entered the mainstream: in recent months, outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and the Hoover Institution have all proclaimed that we are witnessing the resurgence of imperialism on a global stage.<sup>3</sup> Although the world has never been entirely postimperial or postcolonial, recently the tone of such debates has shifted markedly.

Increasingly, empire is framed—with striking candor—as an alternative model for global order. In 2025, a few politicians and groups even openly dreamed of imperial expansion as a solution to “make their own nation great again”—a rhetoric not seen since the end of the Second World War and the fall of fascist imperialism.<sup>4</sup> A future of a fragmented, multipolar world, driven again by imperial ambitions, looms on the horizon, while concepts such as sovereignty, solidarity, and international law are coming under threat. Over the last year or so, the term *empire* has regained a new, and often worrisome, usability. It is this renewed relevance for our troubled present that explains the urgency surrounding the need to discuss the histories of empire.

From a historian’s perspective, this comeback may be of little surprise: in human history, empires have constituted the most common and enduring form of political organization.<sup>5</sup> Until the mid-twentieth century, they ruled the world, and their subsequent decline

1 Peter Pomerantsev, “The Real Danger of the Trump–Putin Summit,” *Time*, August 14, 2025.

2 For broader historical and transimperial discussion of China and geomodernity, see Shellen Xiao Wu, *Birth of the Geopolitical Age: Global Frontiers and the Making of Modern China* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

3 “The New American Imperialism,” *The Economist*, January 21, 2025; “The Age of Empire Strikes Back: Stephen Kotkin on Trump, Wrestling, and the Use of American Power,” *GoodFellows: Conversations from the Hoover Institution*, February 13, 2025; “How the Trump–Putin Summit Signals a Return to Imperial Thinking,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2025.

4 For fascist imperialism, see Daniel Hedinger, “The Imperial Nexus: The Second World War and the Axis in Global Perspective,” *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 2 (2017): 184–205, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022817000043>.

5 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 1.

may soon be seen, in retrospect, as but a brief interlude.<sup>6</sup> Today's imperial resurgence, however, is unfolding alongside what many describe as a "crisis of the global." This crisis has further questioned the convictions underlying the simplistic teleological narrative "from empire to nation-state to globalization"—which has been under fire for quite some time.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, poses a significant challenge to global history. As proponents of the field have recently called attention to, global history is still "conceptually and theoretically a creature of the 1990s, the formative decade of theorisation and euphoria about globalisation."<sup>8</sup> Such conceptual genealogy has now become a liability that cannot be so easily overcome: global history has often rested on the belief that increasing economic interdependence and cultural connectivity would inevitably foster cosmopolitanism and reduce conflict. But now we are witnessing that connectivity does not preclude conflict. The shattering of this optimism has had profound effects on how the world is understood. With shared confidence in a cosmopolitan future fading, scholars in global history last year called for a "systematic rethinking of the global historian's craft."<sup>9</sup>

This is where transimperial history intervenes—not as a replacement for existing approaches and methods, but as a complement providing a timely and fresh approach to rethink how we study our past and reflect on our present. It is more than just an issue of labeling. Rather, the "crisis of the global" has raised questions about the actual units of analysis and what they ultimately aim to explain. Conventional frameworks connected to political entities and processes—such as nations and globalization—set the boundaries and aims of analysis. However, narratives focusing on explaining the emergence of individual nation-states or the rise of globalization look very different from those describing the ongoing interplay of imperial formations.<sup>10</sup> Working with what Ann Laura Stoler defined as imperial formations allows us to move away from empires per se and fixed sovereignty to sliding and contested scales of differential rights. By doing so, transimperial history reveals the mechanisms of power in-between and across imperial formations—perceived as "relations of force" rather than single territorially bound empires.<sup>11</sup> For many topics and issues, both contemporary and historical, it is therefore not enough to merely rethink existing approaches; we believe we must take it a step further. And empires and their long history may hold the key to this. Given the enduring presence of imperial formations, it seems obvious that numerous global or transnational histories both pre-modern or modern are often inherently transimperial in nature and therefore better

6 Concerning the question of imperial durability, see Peter J. Heather and John Rapley, *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America, and the Future of the West* (Yale University Press, 2023).

7 See, for example, Michael Goebel, "After Empire Must Come Nation?," *Medium*, September 8, 2016, <https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/after-empire-must-come-nation-cd220f1977c>. See also Matthias Middell, "Empires in Current Global Historiography," *Comparativ* 29, no. 3 (2019): 9–22, at 9.

8 Stefanie Gänger and Jürgen Osterhammel, "Introduction," in *Rethinking History, Globally*, eds. Stefanie Gänger and Jürgen Osterhammel (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 9.

9 Gänger and Osterhammel, "Introduction," 9.

10 For the concept of imperial formations, see Ann Laura Stoler et al., eds., *Imperial Formations* (School for Advanced Research Press; James Currey, 2007).

11 Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2008): 191–219, at 193.

researched and narrated through what we would like to call the *transimperial prism*.<sup>12</sup> It is against this background that this article explores the question: is transimperial history the new global? We first discuss what transimperial history needs to become a distinctive perspective. A second part then focuses on why, how, and where a transimperial approach differs from a global one. What follows is but a first attempt to map out the emerging field of transimperial history and to discuss how it both builds upon and differs from its predecessors, most notably global history. However, to answer the question if transimperial history is the new global, we first need to clarify what transimperial history is and what the transimperial prism looks like.

## 1 What is Transimperial History?

Long before the term *transimperial* came into use, the field of imperial history was already flourishing. Since at least the turn of the millennium, not only global history but also postcolonial studies, as well as “new imperial history,” have breathed new life into the field.<sup>13</sup> Within new imperial history, the focus was placed on the local and the micro, with inclusion of the grassroots level into imperial history as well as colonial culture, gender, and race.<sup>14</sup> It was heavily influenced by postcolonial, feminist, and cultural studies and challenged the notion that imperial history was separate from life in the metropole. Through such an analytic widening of the field, there has been a shift away from administrative histories toward the lived realities of colonial subjects, producing a wealth of literature on the multisited generation and circulation of colonial knowledge and diverse actors—from imperial brokers to enslaved people—who navigated across empires. Over more than two decades, such approaches have provided fascinating insights into the omnipresence and “everydayness” of the human experience of empires. In many different ways, they have often provided us with *transimperial* histories—mostly *avant la lettre*, as the term itself was scarcely in use before the 2010s.<sup>15</sup> Discussing and analyzing several empires together is therefore not an entirely new agenda. Considering this productive background, transimperial history does not emerge from a vacuum; it rather stands “on the shoulders of giants.”

In generating this academic “imperial boom,” global history played a central role. As Jeremy Adelman has recently pointed out, since the end of the Cold War, “empire became a

12 This term came up in broader discussions with Forrest Kilimnik whom we would also like to thank here for editing and proofreading this article. We would also like to thank Moritz von Brescius, Satoshi Mizutani, Shigeru Akita, and Tomoki Yamada for reading and commenting on the article.

13 Durba Ghosh, “Another Set of Imperial Turns?,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 772–793, at 772–73.

14 Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Stephen Howe, ed., *New Imperial Histories Reader* (Routledge, 2010).

15 Three titles that took broad perspectives early on, by discussing different empires simultaneously: Véronique Dimier, *Le gouvernement des colonies: regards croisés franco-britanniques* (Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2004); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400–2000* (Allen Lane, 2007); Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*.

guiding concept for world and global history.”<sup>16</sup> At first glance, this may come rather as a surprise, as “globalization from the 1970s onwards went hand in hand with the formal end of the last imperial polities.” Therefore, the timing seems off. At second glance, however, this nexus is hardly surprising: the rise of global history and a boom interested in imperial history, coming with new approaches and a shift to cultural issues, indeed occurred synchronously. But this was never a relationship between equals. In global history, empires have been used to show the globality of the nation-state, with Western colonial expansion in turn often being framed as *the* source of globalization. The notion of “imperial globality,” articulated by Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne, perfectly captures this understanding of globalization not as a separate or later phenomenon that replaced empire, but as one fundamentally shaped and structured by European colonialism since the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> In this way, histories of empire were of fundamental use for the so-called global turn. Thus, the topic as such never disappeared from historiography; it was simply made use of in a quite particular way—primarily to explain processes of globalization and to discuss the emergence of nation-states.

This focus on nation-states, however, has had a paradoxical effect. Following Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, the “gold standard” for many scholars of imperial history was to bring the colonizer and the colonized, the metropole and the periphery “into one analytic field.”<sup>18</sup> Even though this approach revolutionized research by refuting the assumption that European nations were sealed off from their colonies, showing instead that the metropole was made in the colonies just as much as the colonies were made in the metropole, it also had a notable side effect. The research focused on intra-imperial processes and single nation-empires rather than connections across colonies or empires. It was in this sense that the colonies often served as an analytic tool for transnational and global history to deconstruct the nation and highlight its fluid boundaries. The paradox lies in the fact that at the exact moment when national histories underwent a process of “transnationalization” or “globalization,” the history of empires thereby largely became “nationalized.” Moreover, thinking together globalization and colonization embodied a Eurocentric teleology of directionality, by definition excluding empires such as the Ottoman Empire or the Habsburg Empire, and other non-European, and non-nation-empires, assuming a rupture at around 1800.

As early as the 2000s, prominent figures in the field began to warn that imperial history was often confined to what could be described as “mono-imperial” frameworks, which focused on national particularities.<sup>19</sup> Stuart Ward observed that the writing of

16 Here and in the following: Jeremy Adelman, “Diffusion, Connection, Interdependence,” in *About Colonialism and Its Varieties*, eds. Alberto Masoero and Emmanuel Betta, *Contemporanea* XXVIII, no. 4 (2025): 647–654, at 647.

17 Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global, 1870–1945* (Belknap Press, 2012).

18 Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (University of California Press, 1997), 15.

19 For the term mono-imperial, see Satoshi Mizutani, “Transimperial Genealogies of Korea as a Protectorate: The Egypt Model in Japan’s Politics of Colonial Comparison,” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 1, no. 32 (2019): 22–49, 45.

the imperial past remained “at the mercy of the national idea,” arguing that even post-colonial theory often left “the nation firmly intact.”<sup>20</sup> For him, the “national paradigms have seemed perfectly logical in a world conceived in terms of distinctive nationalities.” Antoinette Burton pointed in a similar direction when she insisted on the dilemma that the nation as a category of historical analysis is both “woefully inadequate,” but at the same time “indispensable.”<sup>21</sup> She also highlighted the “Anglocentric presumptions of new imperial histories.”<sup>22</sup> And indeed, the tendency to nationalize imperial histories has been further reinforced by the dominance of Anglo-Saxon institutions in the field, which tend to focus heavily on British colonial history and the question of whether the United States serves as the imperial heir to Britain.<sup>23</sup> In this context, globalization was sometimes even reduced to a British affair, as for example Niall Ferguson did by coining “anglobalisation.”<sup>24</sup>

In such histories, there remained little room for others. Against this concern, the logical question was already raised in the 2000s of how to decenter “the British empire in the context of global histories *tout court*.”<sup>25</sup> But, despite such programmatic demands, in the years that follow, the binary of metropole and colony—and thereby the national focus—prevailed in imperial research or was even reinforced. This is not the place to explain why this happened. But we suspect that global power structures in academia played their part, while the logic of anglophone book markets sat quite comfortably with this tendency. The result is that, even as national history has been “transnationalized” and “globalized” for decades, the history of empires, by and large, has continued to be written and understood within national frames.

### *Transimperial History—Some Basics*

It is at this juncture that transimperial history steps in. Simply put, transimperial history aims to bring different empires together into one analytic field.<sup>26</sup> Whenever possible, this is done by combining non-European or comparatively marginalized empires in historiography (for example, the Italian or Portuguese) with the bigger elephants in the room (such as the French or British). To methodologically decentralize and dynamize

20 Stuart Ward, “Transcending the Nation: A Global Imperial History?,” in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Duke University Press, 2003), 44–56, at 44, 49.

21 Antoinette Burton, “Introduction: On the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation,” in *After the Imperial Turn*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Duke University Press, 2003), 1–23, at 8.

22 Burton, “Introduction,” 10–11.

23 For a discussion of the US case, see A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire – A Global History*, America in the World (Princeton University Press, 2018). For the British Empire seen from an Asian vantage point, see Shigeru Akita, *History of the British Empire from Asian Perspectives* (Springer, 2025).

24 Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, “Introduction,” in *Decentering Empire: Britain, India, and the Transcolonial World*, eds. Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, *New Perspectives in South Asian History* 15 (Sangam Books, 2006), 2.

25 Antoinette Burton, review of *Decentering Empire: Britain, India, and the Transcolonial World*, by Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 7, no. 3 (2006), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/209550>.

26 Here and in the following: Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, “Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition,” *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 4 (2018): 429–452, <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2018-4-429>.

empire studies, connectivity must be placed at the forefront of analysis, for it reveals how imperial formations were never isolated but continually shaped by and connected to one another. Transimperial history advances this shift by examining competition and cooperation not as separate dynamics but as interwoven processes that drove imperial transformation. This process often resulted in cooptation—the appropriation or selective adoption of resources, practices, people, or knowledge from other imperial settings—often to reinforce one’s own objectives.

Furthermore, transimperial history does not aim at a comparative study of empires. Rather, it shows how actors within and across empires were aware of one another and how “politics of comparison” were a central part of their transimperial histories.<sup>27</sup> For example, empires often partnered up to enhance their ability to compete. They exchanged technical data on tropical medicine or policing methods to maintain control, even as they vied for territory. A British administrator in India might justify a policy by pointing to a “failure” in the Dutch East Indies; anti-colonial activists in Vietnam might model their resistance on Irish strategies against the British. By tracing these flows, transimperial history reveals the ideas and practices that cut across multiple empires—including both pro-imperial agents and anti-imperial actors.

Just a few years ago, the term *transimperial* required considerable introduction and explanation. However, those days are largely behind us. Recently, an increasing number of scholars have embraced a “transimperial” approach, illuminating very different aspects of history, ranging from the production and circulation of knowledge to different forms of violence. By doing so, scholars have called attention to the role of transimperial actors—ranging from cultural brokers to pilgrims to enslaved people to mercenaries—in a broad range of areas, such as the Caribbean, the Pacific, or Scandinavia.<sup>28</sup> All of these were actors moving across multiple empires or imperial formations.

27 Concerning the concept of “politics of comparison,” see Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 829–865.

28 To name but very few examples: Ulrike Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen: Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880–1914* (Campus, 2011); Satoshi Mizutani, “Anti-Colonialism and the Contested Politics of Comparison: Rabindranath Tagore, Rash Behari Bose and Japanese Colonialism in Korea in the Inter-War Period,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2015.0005>; Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Krienbaum, “An Imperial Cloud?,” *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 2 (2016): 164–182, <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2016-2-164>; Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-Operation and Transfer, 1870–1930: Empires and Encounters*, eds. Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (Bloomsbury, 2015); Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford University Press, 2020); M’Hamed Oualdi, *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Kristin L. Hoganson and Jay Sexton, *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History Into Transimperial Terrain* (Duke University Press, 2020); Moritz von Brescius and Christof Dejung, “The Plantation Gaze: Imperial Careering and Agronomic Knowledge between Europe and the Tropics,” *Comparativ* 31, no. 5–6 (2021): 572–590, <https://doi.org/10.26014/j.comp.2021.05-06.04>; Samuël Coghe, *Population Politics in the Tropics: Demography, Health and Transimperialism in Colonial Angola* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Damiano Matasci and Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, “Une Histoire Transimpériale de l’Afrique: Concepts, Approches et Perspectives,” *Revue d’histoire contemporaine de l’Afrique*, no. 3 (2022), 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2022.0301>; Eiichiro Azuma, “Reflections on Doing Trans-Imperial History,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2022); John L. Hennessey, and Janne Lahti, “Nordics in Motion: Transimperial Mobilities and Global Experiences of Nordic Colonialism,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51, no. 3 (2023): 409–420; Beatrix de Graaf, Ozan Ozavci, and Erik de Lange, eds., *Securing Empire: Imperial Cooperation and Competition in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomsbury,

Transimperial history is thus able to look across empires *and* beyond them—in terms of not only space but also time. The epochal focus of much of the recent works lies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the zenith of European expansion as well as decolonization processes and efforts. However, an important methodological impulse for what probably soon will be labeled a “transimperial turn” came from studies on what is conventionally called the early modern period.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, since empires are a constant of human history, there seem to be hardly any epochal limits to this approach; recent studies on Afro-Eurasian economies in antiquity underline this point.<sup>30</sup> Concerning conventional chronologies, the approach may, for example, aid in overcoming the division between the (European) modern and early modern periods. It may as well help to discuss decolonization, the years after 1945, and the so-called end of empires. Thereby, this approach also reflects on what often is simplified as the legacy of colonialism by focusing on imperial formations.<sup>31</sup> Doing so, transimperial history addresses some of the most crucial political, economic, and social challenges our world faces today.

Consequently, transimperial history has emerged as a vibrant and rapidly growing field in recent years. There is ample proof for this: if we look at it in terms of numbers, we can see that over half of the citations for the term on Google Scholar have occurred within the last five years. Furthermore, in the past fifteen years, its usage has increased more than tenfold as the term has gained traction. Since we first proposed a specific framework for transimperial history—namely to bring different empires into one analytic frame by discussing competition, cooperation, and connectivity—the field thus has greatly developed.<sup>32</sup> In 2018, we did this to address a crisis of global history stemming from Anglo-Saxon dominance in the field. In many ways, this was a pure academic discussion. Nonetheless, today, we are dealing not just with a crisis inside of global history but with a much broader “crisis of the global,” which at this exact moment is propelling transimperial history forward.

Despite this flourishing empirical landscape, however, the field still faces a critical hurdle. While in the last years there has been the production of rich case studies, transimperial history still lacks a sharpened conceptual apparatus. For global history, as well as for transnational history, there has been a long and ongoing discussion since the early 2000s about their potential and limits.<sup>33</sup> This went even to the point that proponents of those

2024); Tom Menger, *The Colonial Way of War: Violence and Colonial Warfare in the British, German and Dutch Empires, c. 1890–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

29 Exemplary for this is E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Cornell University Press, 2014). For the Venetian case, see also Georg Christ and Franz-Julius Morche, “Introduction”, in *Cultures of Empire: Rethinking Venetian Rule, 1400–1700: Essays in Honour of Benjamin Arbel*, eds. Georg Christ and Franz-Julius Morche (Brill, 2020), 1–38, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004428874\\_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004428874_002).

30 Sitta von Reden and Mamta Dwivedi, *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies: Frontier-Zone Processes and Trans-imperial Exchange*, vol. 3 (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023).

31 For a critique of the simplification of colonial legacy within postcolonial studies, see, e.g., Stoler, “Imperial Depris”, 191.

32 Hedinger and Heé, “Transimperial History.”

33 For more recent summaries of the debates, see Dominic Sachsenmaier and Sven Beckert, *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice around the World* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Paul Thomas Chamberlin et al., “On Transnational and

approaches lamented that “more printed pages have been dedicated to discussions on the need for a methodology [...] than to empirical research.”<sup>34</sup> Soon, an empirical turn was called for. Our impression is that developments in transimperial history have so far tended to run in the opposite direction: flourishing research without too much methodological ballast. Notwithstanding, as transimperial history has become an emerging field that is rapidly maturing, we believe it is high time to consider the methodological footing. In other words, it is time to take that next step. For an emerging field to become a distinct approach, it needs more than just momentum—it needs its own method. As we have seen, the new field leans on the broad shoulders of its many predecessors and fellow travelers, but to stand on its own feet, it must emancipate itself in terms of methodology. Without a more clearly defined analytic framework, transimperial history risks becoming a mere buzzword or just another claimed turn. This was the exact danger transnational and global history were facing two decades ago, when there was a fear that it would be “more a label than practice, more expansive in its meaning than precise in its applications, more fashion of the moment than a durable approach.”<sup>35</sup>

The discussions resulting from this fear may have been at times excessive, but they were certainly not superfluous. Distinguishing, distancing, and emancipating transimperial from global history—at least to a certain degree—could therefore prove to be a productive undertaking. Such differentiation is not meant to create rigid boundaries; rather, it sharpens the field and prevents the common mistake of simply pouring new wine into old wineskins. However, defining the fields of transnational, international, and global history remains a challenge. If we position transimperial history in these still ongoing discussions, it is therefore less important to draw crystal clear lines between different fields than to offer new narratives and novel insights. In other words, transimperial history does not seek to create a completely new field, separate from or superior to others, but rather to connect different conversations and open up new perspectives. Similar to the claim made for histories of the “Global South,” transimperial history should aim at retrieving histories otherwise obscured; thereby, it could play its own part in “troubling the global.”<sup>36</sup>

### *The Transimperial Prism*

We propose a conceptual heuristic for analyzing imperial histories through a relational framework: the transimperial prism. It posits that empires did not operate in isolation but were continually transformed through their interactions that were part and parcel

International History,” *American Historical Review* 128, no. 1 (2023): 255–332, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhad138>; and Gänger and Osterhammel, eds., *Rethinking Global History*.

34 Sven Beckert, participation in C. A. Bayly et al., “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1441–1464, at 1446, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.5.1441>.

35 Bayly et al., “AHR Conversation,” 1441.

36 Cindy Ewing, “Troubling the Global South in Global History,” in “On Transnational and International History,” eds. Paul Thomas Chamberlin et al., *American Historical Review* 128, no. 1 (2023): 270–274.

of an imperial configuration shaped and shared by multiple empires and actors. The constant ongoing interplay between cooperation and competition was in many cases a simultaneous process, resulting in practices of cooptation. Looking at this interplay taking place among transimperial actors through the prism brings to light mechanisms of power otherwise not visible. By refracting imperial phenomena through the prism—such as ideas and practices, institutions and infrastructures, and goods and technologies—this heuristic reveals how empires—and the actors within, around, and against them—were collectively, knowingly and unknowingly, engaged, leading to varied and often fractured outcomes.

But why choose the metaphor of the prism rather than simply name transimperial history a lens for approaching imperial formations? If we push the metaphor and compare the two images resulting from the prism versus the lens, the two differ. A lens forms an image: it increases the focus, zooms in, and makes things clearer; but it does not fundamentally transform the light that passes through it. A prism, on the contrary, reveals a spectrum: it redirects, alters, and disperses; it separates the light into its constituent colors. We opt for the term *prism* because transimperial history not only wants to zoom in on a micro level and sharpen an existing image but also aims to dissolve the basic assumption of the closed nature of imperial units—and that is exactly what a prism does with a seemingly uniform ray of light. In other words: A lens would imply first and foremost a new perspective, a prism must come with its own method.

What appears as uniform and constant in national or imperial separate master narratives—“the history of the British,” “the French,” or “the Japanese” empires—is refracted by the transimperial prism. What becomes visible is a spectrum of shared practices, mutual influences, cooperation and competition, as well as spaces in between that cannot be clearly assigned to a single empire and distinct colonies or metropolises. By doing so, we can bring hidden and unseen histories to light. For certain, transimperial history is not the only prism out there. We could conceive of global or transnational ones.<sup>37</sup> But the transimperial prism is a distinctive one and thereby provides for the field a method in its own right.

### *Transimperial Terminology*

However, in defining such a method, we encounter a variety of competing terms that revolve around the same basic aim: bringing different empires into one analytic field. The prefix *trans-* can be replaced by *inter-*, and *-imperial* by *-colonial*. This leaves us with four basic options: *transimperial*, *interimperial*, *transcolonial*, and *intercolonial*. All four are in use, sometimes in very interchangeable ways.<sup>38</sup> Whereas intercolonial and interimperial look back on a more extended history and have been more common overall, transimpe-

37 For attempts to multiply global history, see, e.g., <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ghcc/research/whosglobal-history/> (last access December 2025).

38 April Lee Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ghosh and Kennedy, eds., *Decentering Empire*; Laura Doyle, “Inter-Imperiality,” *Interventions* 16, no. 2 (2014):

rial has only gained popularity in the last few years and seems, as the group's rising star, to be pulling ahead. That being said, we do not want to insist too much on the choice of terms. The most important point in this endeavor is rather to transcend national boundaries in empire studies or global history with its focus on the directionality of modern European imperialism, which is more a question of viewpoint than labeling. Still, it makes sense to stick to one term to avoid confusion as more and more studies fall within its purview. We contend that *transimperial* is the most fitting—and that there are certain advantages coming with its adoption.

So why then does it make sense to use the prefix *trans-* instead of *inter-*? Let us draw an analogy to international history. International, like interimperial, refers first and foremost to a connection between two (or more) polities and therefore presupposes that these entities—whether nation-states or empires—are clearly bounded and separate geographical units. Yet, transnational history has demonstrated the analytic limitations of this assumption by revealing how methodological nationalism—the often unconscious practice of treating the nation-state as the natural container of historical processes—constrains and simplifies the analysis. By the same logic of considering the distinction between transnational and international, transimperial is more than just a substitute for interimperial. As an *inter-*perspective often leaves little room in the story between the two endpoints it presumes—that is to say, entities—a *trans-*perspective shifts the focus to spaces in-between and beyond. This focus aligns with recent trends in historiography to reveal what lies beneath. When examining actors who move across empires, for example, the prefix *trans-* refers to ties across imperial boundaries—dual residencies, layered allegiances, and migration through multiple locales.<sup>39</sup> It also addresses the agency of imperial brokers, many of them non-state actors, who felt at home and operated in numerous imperial settings. The prefix *trans-* is much better suited than *inter-* because the latter implies the existence of separate and uniform entities, an assumption that simply does not work for empires, while the former highlights the inherently multiform character and internal inequalities. The focus of transimperial history is therefore on the circuits, networks, and mobilities that exceeded and transgressed the political and imaginative boundaries of any single imperial polity.

Now, let us turn to the use of *-colonial* versus *-imperial*. Why shall we insist on *-imperial* instead of *-colonial*? Empires can be seen as “large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people.”<sup>40</sup> Transimperial history allows us to look as well at histories between, across, and beyond these large political units. The term *colonies* points mainly at peripheries, settler colonialism, and the colonization of lands. But it is only by using the term *transimperial* that we then address the complicated relationships

159–196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2013.776244>; Gregory E. O'Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619–1807* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

39 Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski, “Introduction: Encounters of Empires. Methodological Approaches,” in *Imperial Co-Operation and Transfer, 1870–1930*, 3–33, at 22.

40 Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 8.

between the metropolises and the colonies, both within individual empires and between empires, while situating these relationships within the power game being played out on varying fields and levels. The term also brings the histories of land empires and overseas colonies into one analytic field. Even more so, it does not create a distinction between continental empires and maritime empires—facets of imperialism that have often been artificially separated.

In short, *transimperial* is the term comprehensive enough to encompass the various approaches found within empire studies. It is flexible enough to fulfill perfectly what Pamela Kyle Cross proposed regarding the purpose of categories: they are “meant to suggest both analytical concepts and narrative strategies.”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the term enables us to shift flexibly across multiple levels, be it spatially or chronologically. And by applying a specific prism, transimperial history can be more than simply an additional layer, just another lens. Using such the transimperial prism brings to light multicolored, unique narratives. The next step is to consider how, if, and in what sense, transimperial history can become in this context the new global.

## 2 ...the New Global?

As there are rival terms for the phenomenon itself, there are also related historiographical approaches on which transimperial history builds. Global and transnational history are two of the most obvious candidates. At this point, both of them can look back on a shared history of several decades of having successfully challenged the narrow confines of national historiography and established themselves as major fields of inquiry.<sup>42</sup> Differentiating transimperial history from transnational history is probably the easier task. Although the latter has successfully de-essentialized the nation, applying it to the colonial context poses challenges. First of all, in many cases, it is anachronistic to project the “nation-state” back into eras where it simply did not exist.<sup>43</sup> But, even in modern times, when nation-states became more prominent, a transnational lens can create a methodological blind spot. For instance, by focusing on the nation as the primary unit to be crossed, it often obscures the imperial dimensions of global conflict.

This is particularly crucial, for example, for the analysis of the carnage and catastrophe of the twentieth century. After 1945, many stories were told almost exclusively from the perspective of nation-states. An approach that concentrates on the persistence of imperial formations in the first half of the twentieth century sheds new light on phenomena that transnationalism obscures—such as the imperial nexus of the world wars or

41 Pamela Kyle Crossley, *What Is Global History?* (Polity, 2008), 9.

42 Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137299833>.

43 Simon J. Potter and Jonathan Saha, “Global History, Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2015.0009>.

the transimperial dynamics of fascism.<sup>44</sup> Seen from Europe, a transnational perspective tends to privilege an “inside-out” view, focusing on European-dominated networks or the failed attempts to institutionalize a “fascist international.”<sup>45</sup> By contrast, a transimperial prism implies a much more “outside-in” approach.<sup>46</sup> Spatially, it reveals that interwar fascism was driven not by international institutions based in Europe, but by processes of “transimperial radicalization” that resulted from imperial wars, which first took place in Manchuria and then in Ethiopia. Chronologically, it shows that the global war did not begin at European borders in 1939 but with the violent expansion of fascist imperialism into Asia and Africa, creating an imperial nexus long before 1939. To be sure, transnational history aims to cross national boundaries. But even so, historical narratives that center around nation-states as the “natural” endpoint of history have difficulties grasping the complex transimperial settings and legacies of many of the world’s regions.

The emancipation of transimperial history from global history is more intricate, as the former owes much to the latter. As the “new kid on the block,” transimperial history is closely related to the legacies of global history and builds significantly on its successes and the depth of methodological discussion surrounding the field. Obviously, for quite a while, global history was defined by a specific focus on connections, often elevating mobility, transfers, and exchange to the primary forces of historical change.<sup>47</sup> As Sebastian Conrad has noted, “the keyword most immediately associated with the term ‘global’ has been ‘connections.’”<sup>48</sup> In this sense, what we proposed as the 3 C’s—connectivity, cooperation, and competition—are not at all exclusively transimperial.<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, transimperial history is well advised, building on the rich literature discussing such concepts central to global history.

At the same time, the maturation of global history as a field has revealed certain inherent shortcomings, particularly in regard to Eurocentrism, assumptions of directionality, and privileging connectivity. Across the coming subsections, we will show how a transimperial history addresses these key shortcomings while foregrounding the mechanisms of power within the analysis. While we recognize that global historians have long been self-critical and have extensively debated on these issues, we think that the transimperial prism for some topics, periods, and areas is a tool to proactively mitigate them. Taken

44 Hedinger, “The Imperial Nexus”; Richard J. Overly, *Blood and Ruins: The Great Imperial War, 1931–1945* (Allen Lane, 2021); Liam Liburd and Paul Jackson, “Debate: Decolonising Fascist Studies,” *Fascism* 10, no. 2 (2021): 323–345, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-bja10039>; Leslie James, “Blood Brothers: Colonialism and Fascism as Relations in the Interwar Caribbean and West Africa,” *American Historical Review* 127, no. 2 (2022): 634–663, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhac155>.

45 On inside-out versus outside-in perspectives, see Jin Sato and Shigeto Sonoda, “Asian Studies’ Inside-Out’: A Research Agenda for the Development of Global Asian Studies,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2021): 207–216, at 212–13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591421000140>.

46 Daniel Hedinger, “Fascist Internationalism: From a Vanished Institution to a Failed Concept?” *Journal of Modern European History* 23, no. 2 (2025): 147–166, at 165, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944251331427>.

47 Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Doing Global History: An Introduction in Six Concepts*, trans. Ben Kamis (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 20–21.

48 Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 64.

49 Hedinger and Heé, “Transimperial History.”

together, these limitations point toward a deeper analytic issue: that is to say, the difficulty of integrating power not merely as a background condition, but as a dynamic and constitutive force. It is here regarding mechanisms of power that the transimperial prism reveals its full heuristic potential.

### *Eurocentrism*

First of all, despite all the criticism and self-reflection, global history has only partially overcome its inherent Eurocentrism. In 2018, scholars accused the field of being little more than a “luxury trade of an elite minority” and “another Anglospheric invention to integrate the Other into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms, in our tongues.”<sup>50</sup> Similar criticism has, as we have seen, already emerged a decade earlier in the context of the rise of new imperial history. But even if there was widespread awareness, the fact that this issue has been discussed for several decades by now speaks to its persistence. One reason might be that despite the stated aim to challenge Western exceptionalism, global history often unwittingly reproduces it. By frequently taking the “rise of the West” as the central puzzle to be solved, or by treating concepts like the nation-state and industrial capitalism as universal yardsticks against which all other histories are measured, the field risks maintaining the West as the normative and narrative center. Furthermore, some of the hierarchies in the worldwide patterns of historiographical knowledge production, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century, remain surprisingly intact today. Thus, even in 2024, “centrism” is still very much alive, concluded Dominic Sachsenmaier: “We see that it is premature to assume that we have already entered a post-Eurocentric age of historiography.”<sup>51</sup>

The challenge of persisting Eurocentrism is not unique to global history; it also affects the very field designed to critique this phenomenon and to make it almost “unthinkable”: postcolonial studies.<sup>52</sup> Postcolonial studies often remain trapped in a form of “reverse Eurocentrism” that still insists on dividing the world into the West and the rest. By focusing almost exclusively on the height of Western colonialism, it effectively marginalizes the histories of non-Western empires like the Ottoman, Japanese, Russian, or Qing. Even recently published histories of colonialism, which labeled themselves as “global” in perspective, are therefore quite often centered around European imperial expansion.<sup>53</sup> “If one would draw an *actual* map of this kind of *Postcolonial World*, there would be large gaps,” Monika Albrecht wrote recently.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, big parts of the world and

50 First quote: Richard Drayton and David Motadel, “Discussion: The Futures of Global History,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (2018): 1; second quote: Jeremy Adelman, “What Is Global History Now?” *Aeon*, March 2, 2017.

51 Dominic Sachsenmaier, “Centrisms: Questions of Privilege and Perspective in Global Historical Scholarship,” in *Rethinking Global History*, eds. Gänger and Osterhammel, 254–273, at 273, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009444002.012>.

52 Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 126–127.

53 Lorenzo Veracini, *Colonialism: A Global History* (Routledge, 2023); Kris Manjappa, *Colonialism in Global Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

54 Monika Albrecht, “Introduction: Postcolonialism cross-examined: Multidirectional perspectives on imperial and colonial pasts and the neocolonial present,” in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and*

long stretches of history disappear from view, reducing the global past to a simple binary of Western perpetrator and non-Western victim. Paradoxically, from this viewpoint, some of these stories share much with Ferguson's notion of "anglobalisation" (mentioned above), even though they are, quite obviously and rightfully so, on a moral level pointing exactly to the opposite. To overcome such Western biases, transimperial history may insist on examining the specific mechanisms of power that existed across multiple empires, rather than focusing solely on European ones. To make this clear, transimperial history does not aim to discard postcolonial critics and/or global perspectives. Rather, it aims to supercharge them by taking their claim to overcome Eurocentrism seriously.

In opening up this analytic purview, the transimperial prism acts as a conceptual heuristic for analyzing imperial histories through a relational framework that removes Europe as the default point of reference. Rather than treating European empires as the implicit starting point for analysis, it starts from the premise that empires—European and non-European alike—were continually constituted and transformed through their interactions with multiple imperial formations. What distinguishes this approach from global history is its emphasis on *who* compared, *how*, and *for what* purposes. Transimperial history thus may concentrate on the comparative acts undertaken by transimperial actors themselves—moments when they drew explicit parallels or contrasts with other empires to develop or refine imperial practices, the so-called "politics of comparison."

In concentrating on specific "politics of comparison," transimperial history moves beyond a vague "global interconnectedness" embedded in European narration to an open analysis that focuses on the multitude of pro-imperial and anti-imperial actors. Satoshi Mizutani, for example, has shown how these politics extended to anti-colonial actors, as figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Rash Behari Bose engaged in "contested politics of comparison," strategically invoking knowledge of British rule in India to either critique or justify Japanese imperialism in Korea.<sup>55</sup> Taking this insight to heart, a transimperial approach insists that imperialism emerged, first and foremost, as transimperial imperialism. Through the transimperial prism, imperial expansion can then be observed as a shared and mutually constitutive project and not just as a diffusion of European models outward. By employing the "politics of comparison," the transimperial prism can thus bring to light mechanisms of power across multiple empires, including non-European and/or non-modern ones.

Hierarchization of knowledge across empires is another case in point. Research has shown that colonial knowledge and the colonial archive were coproduced by Western scientists and indigenous people on the ground.<sup>56</sup> A transimperial prism sharpens this insight by revealing how such knowledge regimes emerged through interactions among

*Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present*, Postcolonialism and Its New Discontents, ed. Monika Albrecht (Routledge, 2020), 1–47, at 2, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367222543>.

55 Mizutani, "Anti-Colonialism and the Contested Politics of Comparison."

56 Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Pidgin-Knowledge: Wissen und Kolonialismus* (Diaphanes, 2018); Marwa Elshakry, "When Science Became Western: Historiographical Reflections," *Isis* 101, no. 1 (2010): 98–109, <https://doi.org/10.1086/652691>; Fa-ti Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Richard

multiple imperial formations, rather than within a single European imperial framework. The transimperial prism reveals more than the interplay of western colonial scientists and indigenous people on the ground but shows a broader array of people and actors involved in the generation of knowledge not only in the metropole and the colony, but across empires on multiple levels.<sup>57</sup>

To give one concrete example: the building of the global undersea cable network in the second half of the nineteenth century is conventionally told as the story of advancing infrastructure due to European, mainly British, imperialism. If we look at it through the transimperial prism, a different image emerges. Gutta-percha, a latex from Southeast Asia, was the material resource indispensable to mantle the cables. European powers could not extract this resource without the vernacular knowledge, skills, and technology of planters on the ground. Most importantly, the distribution of the material resource depended heavily on the maritime infrastructure and trading knowledge of the Johor-Riau Empire.<sup>58</sup> Resource imperialism is thus just one of such examples that shows that authoritative knowledge cut across the binary of Western technical knowledge of the colonizer and indigenous knowledge of the colonized.<sup>59</sup>

### *Directionality*

Our second point concerns the issue of directionality, understood in terms of time and chronologies. Since global history emerged amid the success story of Western globalization and often rests on the notion of global integration as its defining feature, this created a tacit directionality—a hidden teleology where history inevitably marches toward a denser, more connected world and is “prone to teleological alignment,” in the words of Jan Jansen. He further pointed to the risk within global history of “streamlining the past” by “overemphasising inevitable directionality,” be it towards the nation-state or

Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

- 57 Yorim Spoelder, *Visions of Greater India: Transimperial Knowledge and Anti-Colonial Nationalism, c. 1800–1960* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Philipp N. Lehmann, *Desert Edens: Colonial Climate Engineering in the Age of Anxiety*, Histories of Economic Life (Princeton University Press, 2022); Claire Louise Blaser, “Introduction: Transimperial Webs of Knowledge at the Margins of Imperial Europe,” *Comparativ* 31, no. 5/6 (2021): 527–539; Moritz von Brescius, *German Science in the Age of Empire: Enterprise, Opportunity, and the Schlagintweit Brothers*, Science in History (Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- 58 Eleanor Choo, “Feeding the Nervous System of the World: How the Memories of Archipelagic Malay Empires Built the Global Undersea Cable Network, 1850–1900” (working paper presented at the workshop *New Directions in Transimperial History: Young Scholars’ Workshop*, Centre for Transimperial History, Leipzig University), <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-153994>, accessed November 25, 2025.
- 59 Tomás Bartoletti, “Global Territorialization and Mining Frontiers in Nineteenth-Century Brazil: Capitalist Anxieties and the Circulation of Knowledge between British and Habsburgian Imperial Spaces, ca. 1820–1850,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65, no. 1 (2023): 81–114, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417522000391>; Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford University Press, 2017); see also Nadin Heé, “Globalizing Japanese Tuna Fisheries: Oceanic Sovereignty in the Twentieth-Century Transimperial Indo-Pacific,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 78, nos. 2/4 (2024): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ahsse.2023.1>; Jordan A. Howell, “Imperial Crucible: Alcoa and the Transimperial History of American Capitalism, 1888–1953” (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2022).

globalization.<sup>60</sup> Transimperial history is in a better position to bypass this bias, not by just criticizing or rethinking it, but by shifting the focus of analysis.

In other words, directionality looks very different through a transimperial prism than through a global one, with the former disrupting linearity and confronting the teleology of globalization. It shows that we cannot simply replace “globalization” with “transimperialization” as a means of a linear narrative of progression or modernization. The teleology of the one-way move toward a borderless world appears plausible in a context where power structures were less visible, and the world seemed to be in flow, becoming ever more well-off, open, and connected. Transimperial history reorients the analysis by reintroducing the friction of power. It reveals that the “global” was never a destiny, but a specific, historically contingent project often driven by varying imperial formations with their own imperial interests. By embracing a broader spectrum of polities—not just nation-empires but also empires such as the Habsburg or Ottoman, which followed different forms of governmentality—this approach broadens the analytic scope of empire studies. By further explicitly rejecting the linear narrative of “globalization,” transimperial history provides the tools to study multiple, uneven, and sometimes conflicting paths of modernization and connectivity. The approach thus moves away from the “creation myth” of the modern world where barriers inevitably fall, acknowledging instead that history is often a process of re-bordering, fragmentation, and re-imperialization.

With a standard global history toolbox, it is also difficult to explain the “imperial comeback” or the persistence of imperial forms beyond the official end of empires. Here, the transimperial prism may offer alternative chronologies that bridge the conventional divide between the early modern and the modern. Nile Green demonstrates through the concept of “accumulative acculturation” how religious forms did not simply “globalize” in a single wave but adapted sequentially to different imperial environments over centuries, creating a layered temporality that defies simple modernization narratives. Green thereby proposes a “transimperial approach to religious history,” stating that the use of “the rubric of ‘transimperial’ rather than the more general ‘global’ thus allows us to foreground the importance of empires as the formative environments of the new religious entrepreneurs, organizations, and institutions that emerged during the heyday of modern empires before relocating to other empires to find new followers and undergo further adaptive transformations in turn.”<sup>61</sup>

Transimperial history bridges not only the early modern and the modern, but also the divide between the “Age of Empire” and a world of decolonization. This aligns with an argument made by Ann Laura Stoler, who critiques the “progressive” narrative of transition from colony to postcolony, proposing instead the concept of “duress” or “imperial

60 Jan C. Jansen, “Tacit Directionality: Processes, Teleology and Contingency in Global History,” in *Rethinking Global History*, eds. Gänger and Osterhammel (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 185–209, at 197, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009444002.009>.

61 Nile Green, “Geographies of Transimperial Religion: The Transformation of Religious Space in a World of Empires,” *Religion* (2024): 321–346, at 322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2024.2429101>.

durability.”<sup>62</sup> In this view, imperial history is “recursive” rather than linear; elements of imperial rule fold back on themselves and reappear in new forms, making 1945 less of a “zero hour” and more of a reconfiguration.<sup>63</sup> The territorialization of the ocean is a good example to see that this was by no means a linear process from empires to nation-states to globalization, but rather a renationalization that was at the same time underlined by ongoing imperial formations.<sup>64</sup> By uncovering transimperial “politics of comparison”—both diachronic and synchronic—we can for example highlight how directionality operates through reversals, returns, and reconfigurations, rather than linear progression, thereby shedding light on the re-imperialization of the world today beyond simplistic narratives of a “failed” globalization.

### *Connectivity*

Our third point concerns connectivity and, thereby mainly, the issue of space. Transimperial history stresses that empires were very much connected, whether through knowledge production, material connections, or “politics of comparison.” However, simply stressing connectivity is not enough: we must reconsider the very nature of this connectivity. Looking at what happened concerning this issue in global history may be useful: for quite some time now, global history has been criticized for an overdose of connectivity, allegedly privileging narratives of increasing mobility, circulation, and integration. And indeed, in global history’s most euphoric phase during the 1990s and 2000s, the field tended to depict a world of frictionless flows—of goods, ideas, and people moving freely across an increasingly connected, quasi “flat” world. To counter such biases, Roland Wenzlhuemer proposed the concept of “dis:connectivity.”<sup>65</sup> With this concept, he stressed that “connective and disconnective processes are deeply interwoven and they interact intensively.”<sup>66</sup>

If the keyword most closely associated with global history is “connections,” the same could be said about transimperial history.<sup>67</sup> The transimperial prism, by design, emphasizes connections that go beyond national, colonial, and imperial boundaries, exploring areas that do not neatly align with nation-empire borders often assumed in historiography. Work in this field thus often highlights the role of transimperial actors and mobility, thereby revealing shared histories that were previously disconnected. However, despite

62 Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Duke University Press, 2016), 7–9, arguing that “imperial formations are not just things of the past” but possess a “recursive” quality that defies linear chronologies.

63 Stoler, *Duress*, 25–26.

64 Heé, “Globalizing Japanese Tuna Fisheries.”

65 Roland Wenzlhuemer, “Introduction,” in “Forum: Global Dis:Connections,” eds. Roland Wenzlhuemer et al., *Journal of Modern European History* 21, no. 1 (2023): 2–5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221148939>.

66 Wenzlhuemer, “Introduction.”

67 Concerning global history, Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 64; see also Valeska Huber, “Openness and Closure: Spheres and Other Metaphors of Boundedness in Global History,” in *Rethinking Global History*, eds. Gänger and Osterhammel, 139–160, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009444002.007>. For the transimperial here and in the following: Daniel Hedinger, “Transimperial,” in *Dis:connectivity and Globalisation: Concepts, Terms, Practices*, eds. Christopher Balme, Burcu Domagraci, and Roland Wenzlhuemer (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2025), 267–273.

the value of these findings, there remains a danger of an overemphasis on connections—a risk shared with the field of global history.

Furthermore, transimperial history's bias of all things entangled has meant, thus far, that it neglects most things that interfered with or interrupted colonial connections. As a result, discussions of disconnections are so far rare in transimperial history. There have been a few exceptions: already in 2006, David Lambert and Alan Lester argued that “tracing trans-imperial networks [...] goes beyond comparison and looks for actual historical connections and disconnections between different sites of empire.”<sup>68</sup> However, there could still be a lot said about transimperial dis:connections, as it is not enough to simply map flows or mobility in-between empires; we must also understand the dynamics of interruption, blockage, and selective integration that define imperial formations. A convincing transimperial history requires, therefore, more than simple proof of connectivity, and the field could therefore benefit greatly from reflecting more systematically on the concept of dis:connectivity.

There is, however, a key difference between global dis:connectivity and transimperial dis:connectivity: the latter does not revolve around the question of globality, but rather positions imperial formations at the center of the story.<sup>69</sup> Transimperial history precisely investigates how flows were channeled, blocked, or coopted within imperial power structures. This changes the spatial configurations that are being analyzed. To simplify: if global history tends to focus on the fact that things moved over very long distances, transimperial history asks why and how they moved through the mesh of competing and cooperating empires. In other words, global history tends to see flows; transimperial emphasizes the mechanisms of power that control and transform those flows in specific spatial settings.

To grasp this complexity, transimperial history may employ the *jeux d'échelles* (games of scales), a methodological practice advocated by Jacques Revel to analyze how historical actors navigated multiple levels of space simultaneously.<sup>70</sup> Rather than settling on a single scale of analysis—whether the local, national, or global—this approach allows us to examine historical phenomena as dynamic configurations and to play with different scales.<sup>71</sup> The *jeux d'échelles* highlight spatial configurations that do not fit neatly into national or global categories, resonating with recent methodological interventions in transregional studies. As Matthias Middell has argued, transregional approaches similarly to some global history approaches seek to overcome “container-like” understandings of space by focusing on flows that transcend specific regional boundaries without neces-

68 David Lambert and Alan Lester, “Introduction,” in *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–31.

69 Here and in the following: Hedinger, “Transimperial,” 267–273.

70 Jacques Revel, ed., *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience. Textes rassemblés et présentés par Jacques Revel* (Gallimard, 1996).

71 Jan C. Jansen, “Tacit Directionality: Processes, Teleology and Contingency in Global History,” in *Rethinking Global History*, eds. Gänger and Osterhammel, 185–209, at 199, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009444002.009>. See also Jan de Vries, “Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano,” *Past & Present* 242, Issue Supplement 14 (2019): 23–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz043>.

sarily assuming a global reach.<sup>72</sup> Global history has already made great use of the *jeux d'échelles*. However, we believe that focusing on transimperial formations and dynamics could also help to play with the *jeux d'échelles* in quite new ways.

Thus, the theoretical framework of dis:connectivity could also benefit significantly from a transimperial prism. While dis:connectivity is tethered to the concept of “the global,” transimperial history focuses on multiple imperial formations, which frequently operated on scales that are not strictly global. Since not all transimperial exchanges have global intent or repercussions, the transimperial prism reveals alternative spatial configurations, moving the discourse beyond binary questions of global dis:connectivity. By doing so, transimperial history may also add another layer to global micro-history, which focuses on the scales of the global and the local. As transimperial cooperation and competition sometimes played out first and foremost in very regionally limited spaces, the transimperial prism brings out shades and colors on different scales, different *jeux d'échelles* so to speak. One example of what the transimperial prism brings to light can be shown when considering the early modern Caribbean, which already has been described as a “transimperial micro-region.”<sup>73</sup> There, also a very specific form of transimperial dis:connectivities becomes visible: enslaved people and sailors as well as magistrates and merchants alike all lived in a world of bordercrossings and transimperial connectivity that was, at the same time, separated by race and colonial hierarchies. To compare different actors’ dis:connectivities in such a specific transimperial micro-region seems a promising endeavor. Although global micro-history has extensively explored the link between the local and the global, the intersections between the micro-region and the transimperial are structurally distinct. Discussing transimperial micro-regions’ dis:connections may therefore open up new questions, topics, and narratives.

More broadly speaking, the difference between what could be called a global history prism and a transimperial prism leads to fundamentally different spatial focuses. Transimperial networks were, of course, not always limited to specific micro-regions but could be found everywhere in the world of competing imperial formations. At the same time, their main sites of interaction often took the form of (trans)imperial hubs, nodes, or regions that were far more geographically bounded than global networks. Transimperial spheres that come to the forefront through the heuristic tool of the transimperial prism shed light on the spaces in-between. If we zoom in on the “Age of Revolutions,” for example, we see that a site like Saint-Domingue was not merely a French colony, but a hotspot of imperial formations and mechanisms of power on multiple levels across the

72 Matthias Middell, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, ed. Matthias Middell, Routledge History Handbooks (Routledge, 2020), 1–16, at 10. For similar arguments combined with empirical studies, see, e.g., Ulf Engel (ed.), *Africa’s Transregional Conflicts, Comparativ* 6 (2018) or Katja Castryck-Naumann (ed.), *Transregional Connections in the History of East-Central Europe* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021).

73 Jeppe Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires: Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean*, Cambridge Oceanic Histories (Cambridge University Press, 2020); see also Ernesto Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies and New Granada’s Transimperial Greater Caribbean World* (Duke University Press, 2017).

metropolises, colonies, and territories of France, the United States, and the Caribbean, on “Atlantic, imperial, regional, local, and even individual” level.”<sup>74</sup>

To sum up: the configuration of connections and spaces shifts when viewed through the transimperial prism. Transimperial history can productively rethink the nature and scale of dis:connection by playing the *jeux d'échelles* in new ways. The outcome may be histories that are “more than imperial, but less than global.”<sup>75</sup> Often thus, the transimperial prism is analytically more precise as it does not differentiate between levels of analysis, as the often used analytic categories in global history—local, national, regional, and global—which sometimes remain too vague as a heuristic tool, as the definitions of the spaces are blurred and the distinctions between them remain analytically challenging to sustain.

In this sense, transimperial history moves beyond the problem of scale. Whereas global history fixates on the global, tending to see the greatest possible connection, and micro-history anchors analysis in the local, the transimperial approach can position itself flexibly at multiple levels in-between them. Moreover, the global and the local are ultimately all spatial categories that point to the spatial qualities of spaces and extent or reach of connections and the social processes through which spaces are constructed, organized, or legitimized. By contrast, transimperial history—with its emphasis on imperial hierarchies—addresses space more as a socially constituted field of *power relations*. In other words, while the global is first and foremost a spatial category, the transimperial is a category of power.

### *Mechanisms of Power*

While global history has never ignored inequality or domination, its methodological emphasis on circulation and integration has often rendered power secondary or opaque—something that shapes outcomes, but not the analytic starting point. This has important consequences. Eurocentrism persists not simply because Europe is privileged empirically, but because the interwoven nature of imperial power is rarely placed at the center of analysis. For sure, the 1990s normative project of “globalization” as global history is dead. However, the point of reference in global history remains the “global,” be it as a global condition, or as a spatial point of reference even when analyzing the “dark sides” of global connectedness. In this sense, the shortcomings of global history are not accidental; they stem from an analytic framework in which power, specifically imperial power, is present but not organizing.

The transimperial prism reverses this logic. It treats power not as a residual category, but as the medium through which empires interacted. Empires created systems of unequal capability that structured movement, knowledge, and exchange across space and time. Power operated as a mobile and relational force—circulating through institutions, infra-

74 Manuel Covo, *Entrepôt of Revolutions: Saint-Domingue, Commercial Sovereignty, and the French-American Alliance* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 11–12.

75 Potter and Saha, “Global History, Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire.”

structures, and actors—shaping who mattered, who was (im)mobilized, and who could act. From this understanding, imperial power can be seen as a mesh spread across multiple empires, not only European ones, with directionality appearing as contingent rather than inevitable and connectivity being an effect of such power rather than its cause.

Rather than approaching power as a fixed structure or as a residual effect of global processes, transimperial history foregrounds the “politics of comparison” as a central mechanism through which power by processes of hierarchization operated across empires. Historical actors—imperial administrators, reformers, intellectuals, military planners, and anti-colonial activists alike—constantly evaluated, appropriated, and contested practices observed in other imperial settings. Through such acts of comparison, they justified reforms, calibrated violence, legitimated expansion, or articulated resistance. Comparison, in this sense, was not an abstract scholarly exercise, but a practical tool of imperial mechanisms of power.

The case of imperial violence illustrates this. Individual soldiers often did not serve a single empire or nation-state, but moved across empires and states, and sometimes across the delineations of chronologies, beyond the end of territorial empires. A case in point is a Japanese soldier, who had first served in the Japanese army in China, second in both the Nationalist and Communist armies in the Chinese Civil War after he deserted from the Japanese army; then moved on to fight for the Chinese People’s Volunteers in North Korea during the Korea War, to end his military career in the ranks of the South Korean army.<sup>76</sup> In other war theaters, violence was often carried out by actors from the margins of imperial Europe. Swiss and Swedish mercenaries were central to the enforcement of Dutch colonial rule in Southeast Asia, creating a transimperial labor market for violence that allowed citizens of polities without formal colonies to become deeply entangled with the colonial project.<sup>77</sup> Such careers demonstrate how the “imperial” was not just a state project but a lived reality for mobile actors, who were at the same time able to capitalize on, but also deeply enmeshed in a wider mechanisms of power across empires.<sup>78</sup>

Examples of transimperial actors who compared, hierarchized, and navigated different empires extends also to the “underworlds” of imperial formations. Tracing the movement of abductees, smugglers, and itinerant laborers across East Asian empires reveals a geography defined by illicit flows and sexual exploitation, in which actors were embedded in a complex mesh of power, even as they maneuvered—and at times undermined—the authority of the empires operated within and across. Consider the figure of Husayn Ibn ‘Abdallah, a freed Circassian slave who rose to become a general in Tunis as another example of the

76 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Prisoner Number 600,001: Rethinking Japan, China, and the Korean War, 1950–1953,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 411–432.

77 Bernhard C. Schär, “Introduction: The Dutch East Indies and Europe, ca. 1800–1930: An Empire of Demands and Opportunities,” *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 134, no. 3 (2019): 4, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10738>; see also Bernhard Schär and Mikko Toivanen, eds., *Integration and Collaborative Imperialism in Modern Europe: At the Margins of Empire, 1800–1950* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

78 David Richard Ambaras, *Japan’s Imperial Underworlds: Intimate Encounters at the Borders of Empire*, Asian Connections (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

complex, often ambiguous actors who navigated these mechanisms of power. His life was not defined by a simple subaltern status but by his powerful position across the Ottoman and French empires, where his estate became a legal battleground that revealed the clashing and cooperating logics of imperial succession and property.<sup>79</sup>

By centering such historically situated “politics of comparison,” ranging from the individual micro-level to the level of imperial geopolitics, the transimperial prism links micro-level agency to macro-level structures of power. It shows how imperial actors, both pro- and anti-, engaged in comparative practices that privileged certain imperial experiences over others, across both space and time. It reveals how directionality emerged from selective readings of imperial success and failure, rather than from any inherent logic of modernization or globalization. And it demonstrates how connectivity was shaped, regulated, and often distorted by imperial competition, cooperation, and cooptation. Seen this way, the transimperial prism does not merely lift up empire to a more equal standing within global history’s analytic repertoire. It reorganizes how historical explanation works by placing transimperial mechanisms of power—understood as relational, mobile, and comparative—at the center of analysis. By foregrounding imperial power, it renders visible the hierarchies that global narratives often flatten and the violence that underpinned seemingly benign forms of exchange. It is precisely this reorientation that allows transimperial history to respond more adequately to the current crisis of the global.

## Conclusion

So finally, is transimperial history “the new global”? It should be clear by now that the answer cannot be a simple yes. It is certainly not *the* new global in the sense of the one and only. It is therefore not a universal solution that claims to replace all other perspectives, nor is it the only game in town; consequently, transimperial history is not genuinely superior to other approaches, but rather one among many. A quite similar assertion had been made for global history when it was on the rise, against the fear that it would displace other approaches.<sup>80</sup> Transimperial history would do well to insist on repeating this point—not only because the claim to be “*the* new global” would obviously be unrealistic in the first place, but also because the approach is by its very nature not suited to offer one new paradigm or a single master narrative. In other words, claiming to replace, improve, or even make anew all existing approaches would contradict the very idea of this emerging field itself.

Rather, as this article has shown, transimperial history exists in a deep and ongoing dialogue with other approaches. It is clear that empires were never the only political formations that mattered, and it is only fair to acknowledge, for example, that global historians have long thematized hierarchies, exclusions, and inequalities. And indeed,

79 Oualdi, *A Slave between Empires*, 10–12.

80 Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 5.

it is no secret that globalization and imperialism have been inextricably linked. Consequently, concerning mechanisms of power, transimperial history works probably best when complemented by other approaches sensitive to mechanisms of power. And this is true for many other issues. In this sense, transimperial history tries to systematically combine the premises of transnational and global history with the critical potential of postcolonial studies and the new imperial history.

At the same time, however, the field is uniquely positioned to address some of the shortcomings of global history—particularly the lingering anglocentrism and Eurocentrism, linear directionality, and overemphasized connectivity. Why was there so much discussion surrounding those issues, and why did they basically never end, one may ask. Our impression is that a global, postcolonial, or transnational prism is not the right tool to address certain imperial formations. In this sense, we would like to insist that there is indeed something *new* about transimperial history. Yet, as we have argued, it is the *methodology* that makes the difference. In this sense, transimperial history is not merely a special subject, an additional layer, or a stylish perspective; it is a methodological stance coming with a conceptual apparatus.

Taking this step is crucial for the emerging field, as until now, transimperial history has been too much of a buzzword and not enough of a perspective in its own right. But as a field, it should not be defined in the first place through its objects or just a new way of seeing things. It is important to insist that transimperial history comes with distinctive analytic tools and is not just another lens. Why is it important to insist on this difference at all? A lens is merely a vantage point or a shift in focus—and is thereby easily interchangeable. An analytic tool, however, requires commitment and engagement. Without this rigorous, reproducible framework, the field risks becoming more label than practice. Thus, while the transimperial field is quickly emerging, the conceptual apparatus—the method—is what is currently missing.

We do not need a complex theory to grasp transimperiality; rather, it demands an appropriate prism that gives this approach its own distinctive methodology. And it is thus the transimperial prism that creates the specificity of the approach. This conceptual apparatus equals a kind of “transimperial minimum” and is simple yet transformative: first and foremost, it places empires, in the plural, into a single analytic field. Through this prism, empires appear not as static backgrounds for globalization or nation-building, but as the central protagonists—connected, competing, cooperating, coopting, and comparing. Consequently, any phenomenon that traverses this prism is refracted into a spectrum that looks fundamentally different. A transimperial prism is therefore distinct from a global or transnational one. Accordingly, they are not just exchangeable. The key and challenge, then, is to better understand precisely when we need which prism.

Transimperial history is very much a product of our own time. Just as global history was a creature of the 1990s, transimperial history is by now a response to our own moment of geopolitical fragmentation and imperial resurgence. There are dangers and potential connected to this. For historical studies, presentism is always a looming danger. Our aim has never been to say that we should use the present crisis to turn the table on global history

once and for all. On the other hand, today, as we witness a crisis of democratic liberalism and the comeback of imperial wars of conquest, studying the history of nation-empires in isolation seems no longer a viable option. At the same time, the inequalities of power and resources that drove empires are still with us, as are the disruptive effects of their breakdown. Transimperial history may help us understand the conditions, ideas, and actions that brought us to this uncertain present.

By focusing on the spaces in-between, transimperial history challenges the privileged link presumed between nations and their empires, thereby complicating any depiction of imperial history as one nation's special path to one particular empire. It further brings scholars of area studies, historians of single empires, and global historians into a meaningful conversation. It challenges us to look at the world not as a flat surface of "global flows," nor as a map of separate imperial blocs, but as dynamic, unequal, and deeply entangled mechanisms of power. By using the method of the transimperial prism, we can bring to light the many multicolored unique narratives found within this web.

Writing history always requires drawing boundaries. Transimperial history is no exception to this. Just as in every other subfield, these boundaries concern the choice of spaces, temporalities, and actors. At its best, transimperial history draws these boundaries in a very different way. Distinct from the tools of global history or conventional empire studies, it sets new parameters that allow us, for example, to analyze multiple imperial formations as well as mechanisms of power that would otherwise remain invisible. Even if transimperial history may not provide "the new global," it thus still offers something unique. We believe that as a field still in the process of developing, transimperial history remains an approach brimming with potential, with many stories yet to be told. In this sense, it does not necessarily make everything *new*, but it makes many things *different*.