Empires of knowledge: introduction

Axel Jansen, John Krige & Jessica Wang


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2019.1680141

Published online: 20 Jan 2020.
INTRODUCTION

Empires of knowledge: introduction

Axel Jansen\textsuperscript{a}, John Krige\textsuperscript{b} and Jessica Wang\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}German Historical Institute Washington, Washington, DC, USA; \textsuperscript{b}School of History and Sociology, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA, USA; \textsuperscript{c}Department of History, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the mobilization of knowledge as an adjunct to modern state power became essential to imperial projects worldwide. As traditional empires consolidated colonial rule by backing administrative legal structures with coercive policing and military force, they found that legitimacy also called for legibility. The gathering and creation of information about local custom and habit, indigenous structures of power and productive practices that could be ‘improved’, resources that could be exploited – such forms of knowledge facilitated governance, whether by engaging local elites in the colonial project, displacing and supplanting existing structures of political authority, extending systems of surveillance and control, or otherwise expanding the reach of imperial rule. Empires combined hard with soft power, producing a cohort of trained imperial agents in metropolitan institutions – universities, foundations, and, in the post-World War II period, international organizations, think tanks – whose fieldwork aided the projection of power abroad.

Our mutual interests in science, nation-building, the movement of knowledge, and the global dimensions of power (whether in national or colonial contexts, or the blurred boundaries between the two) have brought the editors of this special issue together to reflect upon the twentieth-century history of knowledge and empire.\textsuperscript{1} In particular, we take inter-imperial collaboration as our organizing theme, in order to explore the extent to which the global project of empire rested upon, and even required, interchange and joint action among colonial powers. As Anne L. Foster has noted, studies of imperialism have generally confined themselves to the colonizer-colonized dyad, and the scholarly literature has only just begun to consider the forms of collaboration between empires that shaped the age of high imperialism.\textsuperscript{2} This volume foregrounds inter-imperial relations as a framework for understanding global movements of science, technology, and expertise. It moves beyond our earlier concerns with nineteenth-century US nation-building, and twentieth-century nation-building worldwide, to engage in an ongoing reassessment of the place of the Cold War in our historical imagination, this time focused on the production, circulation, and inter-imperial sharing of expert knowledge at diverse sites from the late nineteenth century into the 1960s.

Multiple forms of inter-imperial collaboration operated in tandem with the political rivalries that so often marked the Age of Empire. Imperial governments found that they
had to deal with similar problems and opportunities in their territories that required, or at least benefited from, educated officials in the ‘periphery’ sharing knowledge with ‘colleagues’ from other countries who exercised similar professional ambitions on behalf of their ‘metropolitan’ governments. As the essays in this volume show, the need for cooperation sometimes grew out of conditions on the ground, such as the spread of a disease that respected no territorial boundaries, or the perceived need to introduce new foods and plants into a territory with seemingly untapped productive capacity. It could also simply be driven by the need to save time and money by drawing on what others already knew.

Cooperative relations between empires contributed to the emergence of the new internationalism at the turn of the century while, at the same time, also establishing the imperial foundations of its more progressive, universalist aspirations. The increasingly interconnected world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its promise of increased prosperity and its potential for chaotic geopolitical conflict, prompted innovations in institution-building and novel opportunities for experts to take advantage of modern technological and commercial possibilities. For example, the efficient use of national and transnational communications systems (telephone, rail, radio, commercial shipping, eventually air transport) within and between imperial states themselves, as well as with their far-flung colonial possessions, led to the formation of international organizations where technically trained representatives negotiated standards that transcended national boundaries. Experts from nation-states, themselves locked in a ruthless conflict to expand their global influence – a conflict made possible by the very technologies that tied them together in material networks – regularly rubbed shoulders with one another, shared knowledge, and negotiated metrics and procedures to render the natural and social worlds legible and governable at a distance. International science took shape, not within a neutral internationalism of equality among nations, but within an environment strongly conditioned by the flows of power that brought empires and their respective knowledge apparatuses in contact, whether in the pursuit of mutual interests or in the furtherance of competitive advantages. It carved out a space that co-existed with, but also claimed some autonomy from, rivalry at the level of high politics, for the pragmatic reason that it promised to make colonial powers ‘masters and possessors of nature’ so as to enable them to rule more effectively at home and to project their power abroad.

All but one of the papers in this special number were originally presented at a workshop convened at the University of British Columbia in September 2017, and under the sponsorship of the German Historical Institute Washington’s West Coast branch. All of the authors address the knowledge/power nexus itself, and unravel the roles of experts in developing enriched understandings about colonial and putatively post-colonial societies as part of the global cultural, economic and political agendas of metropolitan centers of power from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s. They explore the guiding ambitions and material practices that defined scientific and technological collaboration across borders through case studies in the areas of agriculture, the geosciences, public health and medicine, dam-building and urban planning. Most of the essays focus on the United States and its deployment of scientific and social scientific knowledge from the time of its emergence as a global power, to its heyday as a superpower in the post-World War II decades. The inclusion of a study of German and British attempts to control sleeping sickness in early twentieth-century East Africa also suggests
the need to situate the United States on the same plane as other aspiring empires amid the geopolitical currents that made and remade the international system across the long twentieth century. As the United States moved from an era of high imperialism to one of cold war conflict, colonial expertise produced neocolonial social formations, even as post-colonial societies attempted to mobilize technoscience in order to fulfill nationalist aspirations in the name of modernization. The essays, taken together as a collective whole, thus force us to ask how – or whether – the post-World War II discourse of ‘development’ differentiated itself from the old ‘civilizing mission’ of colonialism in its uses of knowledge and its quest for ‘progress’.

The volume opens with Jessica Wang’s account of global flows of species and ideas, along with inter-imperial collaboration in agriculture in early twentieth century Hawai’i. Seeds and plants, along with parasites collected for purposes of insect pest control, circulated along with agricultural experts, entomologists, and information in a vast network tying together botanical gardens and agricultural experimental stations across the globe. Seeds and plants moved within diverse inter-imperial, intra-imperial, and international linkages that had broader implications for law and foreign relations. With the exchange of plant materials, for example, came the risk of unwanted introductions of insects, fungal diseases, and other plagues that could devastate agricultural systems. The United States responded with quarantine and inspection regimes that raised basic legal questions about the extension of national regulations to overseas territories, and whether places such as the Territory of Hawaii or the Panama Canal Zone counted as ‘foreign’ or ‘domestic’ from the perspective of the American empire. When such control measures failed, efforts to combat voracious insect pests that had established themselves in novel Hawaiian habitats then stimulated entomological expeditions to collect parasites for release in the islands to manage damaging insect populations. Wang follows the travels of territorial entomologist David Fullaway to Asia in search of melon fly parasites in 1915–16 in order to reveal the diverse forms of inter-imperial diplomacy – through the everyday work of U.S. consuls abroad, the relationships between imperial agricultural and botanical institutions, and the negotiation of logistics necessary for keeping insects and their parasites alive while in transit – that made such expeditions possible. More broadly, the biological management of the American empire in Hawai’i was an ongoing enterprise sustained by scientific, economic, political, and diplomatic connections between empires that defined the inter-imperial character of the international system in the early twentieth century.

Mark Hendrickson’s essay addresses similar themes from the perspective of geology and state power, by focusing on American geologist George F. Becker’s peregrinations between colonized spaces at the turn of the century. Economic geology, like economic entomology, was a crucial disciplinary formation in the spread of imperial power. Becker, as a geologist with ties to the U.S. Geological Survey, embodied his agency’s evolving global mission to scout out the world’s resources in the service of American economic and geopolitical ambitions. Megan Black, in an important study, has elucidated the Department of Interior’s crucial role from its inception in developing the United States’ ‘mineral frontiers’ throughout the world. Becker, through his experiences in South Africa and the Philippines, operated in precisely those circles that Black has described. Moreover, the formative nature of his South African sojourn, which cast long shadows over his analysis of political and geological possibility in the Philippines,
illustrates how inter-imperial exchanges provided experts with crucial learning experiences. In South Africa, Becker identified not just useful geological intelligence about natural resources that he passed on to higher authorities – including Theodore Roosevelt, future President of the United States – but also, in his encounters with British imperial power, a model of colonial governance and empire-building for the United States to follow in the Philippines. Ultimately, geological expertise melded with turn of the century racial ideology and the allure of imperial prowess to make Becker into an ‘advance agent of empire’, whose experiences underscore the inter-imperial underpinnings of U.S. overseas empire at the cusp of the twentieth century.

Mari Webel’s paper on the effort to combat trypanosomiasis, or ‘sleeping sickness’, in German and British colonies along the northern littoral of Lake Victoria in East Africa focuses on fieldwork and the ‘inter-imperial intimacy’ of face-to-face interactions that shaped scientific cooperation on the periphery. Collaboration was demanded both by the etiology of the disease and the reluctance of metropolitan authorities to invest heavily in its eradication. Already in the early 1900s, colonial officials perceived the need to deal with an aggressive and deadly insect-borne parasite that ultimately killed at least a quarter of a million people in the Lake Victoria basin during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Colonial governments premised their right to rule in part on their self-proclaimed ability to tame and civilize spaces through disease control, which made tropical medicine an essential adjunct to empire. In a region distant from metropolitan centers and their priorities, however, locally stationed physicians by necessity had to rely on nearby colleagues located across colonial boundaries for ideas and resources. Hence in the early 1900s, the Lake Victoria littoral became a zone of inter-imperial exchange, in which, for example, German physicians deliberately sought out advice and resources from the British laboratory in Entebbe to compensate for their inability to tap into German colonial laboratories in Amani or Dar Es Salaam hundreds of miles away. Consequently, bacteriological techniques and a focus on the tsetse fly as disease vector came into German medical practice along the littoral via British expertise in Entebbe. The British, for their part, although the senior partners in this exchange network, nonetheless benefited from German data as well as the mutual project of controlling disease carried by tsetse flies that did not respect political borders between colonial possessions. Webel’s account shows how the local conditions faced by medical officers in the field combined with ‘empire on a shoestring’ to shape the inter-imperial exchange of knowledge and practice.

The essays by Wang, Hendrickson, and Webel all highlight the importance of inter-imperial knowledge-sharing in the field at the turn of the century. The next two contributions to this volume, by Theresa Ventura and Vincent Lagendijk, move ahead to the developmental visions that bridged the pre- and post-World War II periods. Ventura’s examination of the politics of white rice in the Philippines and efforts to prevent beriberi underscores the competing forms of national, colonial, inter-imperial, and international aspiration that intersected with various technological solutions to thiamine deficiency in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, colonialism spurred beriberi’s emergence as a major health problem in Asia during the second half of the nineteenth century, through the confluence of industrialized mills that turned nutrient-deficient, milled white rice into a cheap dietary staple that could feed colonial populations, with modernist discourses that associated pure, glistening white rice with social
progress. By the late 1900s and early 1910s, imperial settings also shaped parallel efforts to identify solutions, starting with multiple colonial governments’ use of prisoners or otherwise confined populations to conduct experiments that confirmed that diets depending on milled white rice caused beriberi, leading experts in tropical medicine to imagine that inter-imperial measures enacted regionally could eradicate beriberi entirely. Opposition from millers, as well as social norms surrounding white rice consumption, stymied such proposals, leaving American experts to compete with Filipino nationalists over high- versus low-tech means of dealing with thiamine deficiency in both the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Ventura’s incisive analysis of rice enrichment ultimately demonstrates the broad array of developmental possibilities and aspirations in play by the mid-twentieth century. Modernization American style constructed a network linking US rice producers, US corporate interests, local millers in the Philippines, and Filipino consumers. It was driven by the prospects of new markets for US farmers and by sales of synthetic thiamine by big pharma. Modernization Filipino style, as led by the elites, viewed improved public health as an instrument of nation building, sought to affirm sovereignty for a people rebuilding their lives after the Japanese occupation, and balked at dependency on a single giant US pharmaceutical company. Modernization as lived by the individual Filipino consumer was embodied in a polished grain of white rice that stood for national progress and personal prestige. Finally, modernity as defined by international organizations post-World War II was a complex package that respected the dietary preferences of the population, advised against mandatory enrichment, and proposed a more varied diet that supplemented white rice with other thiamine-rich foods.

Where Ventura teases out the global relationships within a grain of white rice, Vincent Lagendijk sheds light on the international contexts of grand plans to dam the Mekong River beginning in the 1950s. Cold war histories have frequently referenced Lyndon B. Johnson’s call in 1965 for a massive, American-sponsored damming project in the Mekong River Valley, which he hoped could entice Ho Chi Minh’s government in northern Vietnam to accept co-existence with the U.S.-backed government in South Vietnam and abandon its efforts to reunify the Vietnamese nation. Langendijk explores the deeper imperial and international circumstances surrounding this seemingly quixotic proposal. The colonial roots of the Mekong River project were twofold. First, it drew upon the New Deal model of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), by taking the domestic project of dam-building in a depressed American south that officials and social critics in the 1930s frequently referred to as an internal colony of the United States, and using it as a template for modernizing similarly benighted regions abroad after World War II. Second, the Mekong effort drew on pre-World War II expertise derived globally from dam-building projects in the British, French, and Japanese empires, as well in Soviet Russia. From this earlier history of dam-building came the formation in 1955 of the UN-backed Mekong Committee, composed of regional representatives and supported by diverse international experts, which continued to explore dam-based development in subsequent decades, even as the Vietnam war raged and spilled over into neighboring countries. The globalized TVA of the cold war was therefore not simply a manifestation of the U.S. projection of power, as other scholars have depicted it. Rather, it reflected a rich history of imperial damming projects backed by elaborate dreams of progress and economic improvement, combined with post-1945 international efforts that made TVA-
Style projects global to the core. In this context, grand schemes to dam the Mekong River represented not just the developmental objectives of modernization theory under U.S. foreign policy, but also the internationalist aspirations of the post-World War II, UN-centered world of international organization. As Lagendijk points out, that realm of internationalist possibility could not easily escape its own imperial origins, given the dominance of former colonial experts, including the engineers who had served as consultants for imperial projects all over the globe during the previous half century, and who now advised and staffed postwar international organizations.

Frederik Schulze’s essay on the Guayana region in Venezuela calls attention to the many interests involved in Cold War developmentalism, which encompassed the geopolitical priorities of the United States, the nation-building aspirations of the Venezuelan state, and the competing agendas of diverse experts – engineers, economists, urban planners of various stripes, and one enterprising anthropologist – from both the U.S. and Venezuelan sides. The revolution in Cuba had turned Latin America into contested territory as the US sought to preserve and expand its influence, political and otherwise. John F. Kennedy’s 1961 Alliance for Progress, enabled countries such as Venezuela to mobilize US support for their own ends. Between 1961 and 1965, the Corporación Venezolana de Guayana (CVG) contracted and paid for expert input by specialists at MIT and Harvard University. Living up to the Rostovian paradigm, academic American actors were ready to provide knowledge for developing – through investments, dams, industry, and a new city – an area in Venezuela considered remote by that country’s urban Caracas elites. Although not a case of inter-imperial collaboration as ordinarily understood, Schulze’s account reminds us that the nation – here in the form of the CVG’s elite experts and their service to the Venezuelan government – has also functioned historically as a colonizing project in internal regions distant from metropolitan centers.7 To that extent, the relationship between the CVG and its American counterparts, and the resistance to both from locals in the Guayana region, echoed the inter-imperial dynamics that we have identified in the other essays in this volume. Schulze explains the many complications arising from the cooperation of various actors peddling knowledge for repurposing the Guayana region: the ‘internal colonialism’ represented by the CVG, urban planning ideas taken to Venezuela by academics arriving from Cambridge, and, ironically, the potential for a critical and realistic assessment of developments on the ground by one anthropologist on the US team. In the end, for Schulze, Guayana comes to represent the failure of the Rostovian paradigm as frictions between Venezuelan employers and their hired American experts slowed the project to a halt. All the same, the prestige derived from cooperation with the US, despite its Cold War framing and intentions, bolstered Venezuelan autonomy by helping to legitimize the country’s elites.

Taken together, the papers in this volume highlight the transnational circulation of multiple forms of knowledge between colonial and neo-colonial powers, and between ‘metropolitan’ centers and their ‘peripheries’, among researchers, engineers, and administrators in different institutional settings. While emphasizing the continuity of knowledge-sharing across the cold war divide, they also contribute to a more refined understanding of the ‘discontinuity’ between the colonial and postcolonial orders. The circulation of expert ideas between traditional empires continued after World War II, but their bearers now acted in a new global space that combined an emphasis on national sovereignty for post-colonial states with a renewed commitment to internationalism.
This was expressed in the establishment of organizations such as the United Nations and its scientific and technical agencies, and supported financially by major philanthropies such as the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations or the World Bank. During the colonial period the needs of indigenous peoples were defined by metropolitan authorities in line with their need to control and exploit their territorial possessions. Now the legitimate exercise of knowledge/power in an asymmetric, hegemonic field depended on consensus-building with fractions of local elites. That consensus was made possible by a shared commitment to ‘development’, a term suitably vague to unite actors with a variety of interests in a single cause, but also a term that held the promise of improvement for those who had been exploited and dispossessed by decades, not to say centuries, of colonial rule. All the same, ‘developmentalism’ as an intellectual rallying cry collapsed in the 1970s, discredited by its focus on economic growth at the expense of addressing socio-economic inequality and the persistence of poverty, a choice of priorities that exposed its heritage in the colonial systems of governance that it was supposed to supplant. Since then, we have been left with the danger of pouring the baby out with the bathwater by promoting the role of finance capital at the expense of state intervention for improving people’s lots at home or abroad. The multiple resources invested in promoting its imagined futures colonize minds, destabilize governments and pauperize millions all over the world.

Notes

2. Foster, Projections of Power, 5; A 2003 volume edited by Foster and Julian Go also explicitly highlighted the ‘inter-imperial’ as an organizing theme: Go et al., The American Colonial State, esp. Go, “Introduction: Global Perspectives,” 18. More generally, references to inter-imperial relations have become increasingly common in recent work in international history.
3. Beckert, Empire of Cotton, 310–11; Rosenberg, Transnational Currents 1870–1945; and Tworek and Müller, “The Governance of International Communications.”
4. On this point, see Mazower, No Enchanted Palace.
8. Ekbladh, The Great American Mission, 244.
9. In a similar vein, Thomas Haskell has argued that modernization ‘is not a distinct or separable episode in the history of the social sciences’ since the 1940s but ‘a vital current flowing … through the entire history of the social sciences.’ In his perspective, to abandon the idea of modernization is to abandon the social scientific discourse we share and take for granted in writing essays and introductions such as this one. Haskell, “Modernization on Trial,” 235–63.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Bibliography