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Imperialism and coloniality in management and organization history

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In the ongoing debates about the role that historical research can play in the development of theory and the role that theory plays in management and organization history research, historical research itself is sometimes portrayed as being largely functionalist, realist, empirical, and with limited theoretical grounding (Clark and Rowlinson 2004; Booth and Rowlinson 2006; Durepos and Mills 2012; Rowlinson and Hassard 2013; Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker 2014; Maclean, Harvey, and Clegg 2016; Suddaby 2016; Suddaby and Foster 2017). Alternatively, it is sometimes characterized as narrowly reliant on transaction-cost economics and the microeconomic foundations of the Chandlerian paradigm (Whittington 2008; Fligstein 2008; McCraw 2008). This is sometimes correct, of course, but also masks that there are many types of theory and multiple ways in which history engages with and helps develop theoretical perspectives. As Jordanova observes, in ‘the business of doing history, “theory” is a constant presence, whether acknowledged or not . . . [a]nd since we cannot escape it, it is better to understand, not only its role in current historical practices, but [also] its origins’ (Jordanova 2006, 80). The starting point for this Special Issue was in relation to expressly historical and historicized theory-sets whose focus was imperialism and empire. Classical theories of imperialism drew on historical knowledge and data from the nineteenth-century empires to develop their analysis. Later, historiographical theories of imperialism – most notably the ‘Imperialism of Free Trade’ and ‘Gentlemanly Capitalism’ – were developed from interpretations of the literature on imperial history (Hobson 1902; Lenin 1999; Schumpeter 1951; Gallagher and Robinson 1953; Cain and Hopkins 2002, 1994). More recently, postcolonial theorists have all drawn heavily on historical interpretations to develop their arguments (Chibber 2014; Quijano 2007; Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008).

These historical treatments are not antiquarian treatises without contemporary significance. The degradations of empire and imperialism – its violence and the inequalities that it created – have an enduring legacy. This has been described as an ‘imperial debris’, a continuing ‘imperial presence’ that still fractures the contemporary landscape – cultural, economic, physical and psychological (Stoler 2008). As Stoler argues, contemporary problems such as ‘toxic dumping in Africa, devastated “waste lands”, precarious sites of residence, on-going dispossession, or pockets of ghettoized urban quarters – are features of our current global landscape whose etiologies are steeped in the colonial histories of which they have been, and in some cases continue to be, a part (Stoler 2016, 3)’. These disposessions were multiple. Quijano argues that colonialism repressed ‘the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global
colonial domination’ while also ‘expropriating from the colonized their knowledge, specially in mining, agriculture, engineering, as well as their products and work (Quijano 2007, 1690)’. In Gomez-Barris’s account of ‘extraction’ as an economic process and metaphor for structural legacies of imperialism, she observes that ‘before the colonial project could prosper, it had to render territories and peoples extractible, and it do so through a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence (Gómez-Barris 2017, S)’. Imperialism was, then, a mutually reinforcing process of oppression and exploitation, which was not purely about physical and human resources but also about knowledge. The argument, by extension, is that processes of imperialism are ongoing and renewed in the capitalist world economy.

The historical and contemporary claims made by Quijano, Gomez-Barris and other decolonial writers relate to management and organization and its linkage to business activities. There is also an established business and management history literature concerned with imperialism. There is a long-standing historiography on the role that corporations have played in the process of imperialism in ‘informal’ spheres, in particular in Latin America (Platt 1977; Jones 1980; Miller 1999). The focus for those writers was on how business incorporated nominally independent countries within the British imperial system, through a combination of capital investment, consular pressure, technology transfer and trade. This argument has been extended to US influence in the Cold War by several more recent contributions, ranging from topics as varied as the structure of the political economy to the Americanization of business education (Grocott and Grady 2014; Kumar 2018; Cooke 2006; Cooke and Alcadipani 2014). Similarly, there are contributions that have examined how knowledge has been used in colonial business activity (Mollan 2009), how management practices rooted in colonial repression – such as slavery – have endured into the present (Cooke 2003; Rosenthal 2018) and how power structures formed by corporations endured through the process of decolonization into the postcolonial period (Verma and Abdelrehim 2017). In this journal specifically, there have been theoretically informed discussions of imperial and colonial issues. These include, for example, how imperial narratives were incorporated into the internal discourse of the Hudson’s Bay Company (Smith and Simeone 2017), how internationalization strategies stretched from the colonial period to that of the emerging markets (Sluyterman and Bouwens 2015), leadership in an imperial military setting (Tikkanen 2016), decoloniality and the Cold War (Wanderley and Faria 2012) and postcolonial reflections on the use of archives in management and organization history research (Decker 2013).

This Special Issue called for articles that sought to contribute further to this diverse and flourishing literature. In particular, the authors were encouraged to explore how business – and managerial practices of firms and other international organizations – created and sustained the social and economic relationships described by the writers on coloniality and imperialism. The aim was to reveal how international economic relations, social and economic development and enduring inequalities were shaped by management and organization. A range of approaches has been adopted.

The article by Cornelius, Amujo and Pezet is a discussion of the relationship between structural power and the continuities of ideas and practice in the British imperial system. This is with reference to the connection between slavery in labor relations and the racial assumptions that underpinned these relations, in this case in Nigeria in the early twentieth
century. To frame this discussion, Cornelius et al. draw on Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ (also previously discussed in this journal [McKinlay, Carter, and Pezet 2012]), which they describe as ‘a practice of power which aims to govern a population through knowledge-informed guidance of individual behaviour’. For Cornelius et al., governmentality occurs when a colonial possession moves from being a territory that has been conquered or acquired and becomes, instead, a country that needs to be governed. In this context, labor needed to be organized to support the economic activities that the colonial state wished to conduct or encourage. This was embedded into a range of other state apparatuses that were used to organize the colonial project itself.

This idea is used to explore how commercial activities and labor relations developed in Nigeria, in particular with reference to the influence of Lord Lugard on the nature of economic development and governance. The use of forced labor and its relationship to the legacies of slavery are discussed, with the essential continuity of practice highlighted. As Cornelius et al. note, the ‘use of slave labour (alongside forced labour) continued in Colonial Nigeria 90 years after slavery in North America and the Caribbean was deemed unlawful’. In response to rising social tensions, labor unionized leading to conflict with the colonial state. In this way, the structural treatment of labor by the colonial state led directly to resistance and challenge to it. The broader argument that the authors’ develop is that colonial governmentality drew ideas from the period and practice of slavery earlier in imperial history and that racist notions of African workers were essential to the leitmotif of commercial enterprise and economic imperialism in Nigeria.

The article by Kivijarvi, Mills and Helms Mills (as with that of Paludi, Helms Mills and Mills) examines Pan-Am airways and so relates to American imperialism. The article focuses on ‘the narratives produced by and associated with the airline’. As such the article is situated with reference to the role the narratives have in management and organization history (Clark and Rowlinson 2004; Rowlinson and Casey et al. 2014). The article makes two main contributions: one connected to the specific source material and a second broader claim that is connected to how the authors see ANTi history as an intellectual project in counterpoint to other types of history.

The article begins by discussing the narrative turn in history, distinguishing between history as narrative and history as past, drawing on the historiographers that inform the development of the axioms of ANTi history. These distinctions are important to the position of the article with reference to ANTi history, which is very clear in its central lacunae that history is socially and intellectually constructed and not an objective or ontologically ‘real’ version of the past. The authors then explain their integration of Actor-Network Theory as means of deconstructing or (or reconstructing) knowledge with reference to the historical texts (see also Durepos and Mills 2012, 2012).

The article focuses on a historical moment in the history of the Pan-Am airline, as the company dealt with (and narrated) a conception of a competitive ‘German Threat’ from a Colombian airline with a strong ‘German’ influence in terms of the individuals involved, many of whom were Austrian or German born. In the 1930s, this airline was a rival to Pan Am in South America, before being forcibly taken over by Pan Am with the help of the Colombian government. Accounts of those events were – within Pan Am – imbued with anti-Nazi rhetoric. The article discusses how corporate histories of these events were used by the organization to locate itself in a particular narrative role – largely as ‘heroic,
pioneering, technologically advanced [and] patriotic’. This, of course, obscured the neo-imperialism inherent in the growing business interests in Latin America, which brought with them imperial impulses of an economic, cultural and political nature. In this way, the dominance of Pan Am in Latin America and its role in the influence of the United States as an imperial power in the mid-twentieth century are deconstructed.

The authors also use this article to situate ‘ANTI-history’ as a stage beyond the postmodernist influence in history (a development which they refer to as ‘amodernist’). One of the conscious features of ‘ANTI history’ is in its reliance on, and need for, an already produced history (preferably realist, but also history influenced by postmodernism) to which its analysis can stand in counterpoint. In this sense, then, the approach is inherently revisionist, seeking to explore the ways in which existing historical accounts, often in an organizational setting, have been constructed. This is also true of the article by Paludi, et al.

The article by Paludi et al. is an exploration of how theoretical perspectives that come from decolonial studies can be used to examine and interpret documents and images produced in an organizational setting – and what this reveals about how organizations saw colonized peoples. Once again, the organizational subject is the Pan-Am airline, though the terrain that is covered is very different to the article by Kivijarvi et al. The first purpose of the article is to explore how Pan Am represented Latin America over time. This is achieved by examining maps, travel guides and advertisements. The authors use decolonial feminist theories to deconstruct the sources, in particular the ideas of Gloria Anzaldúa. The representation of Latinas and Latinos in the sources shows how imperial/colonial tropes were reproduced to make travel and tourism to Latin America attractive to the predominately Anglo-Saxon market/audience in North America. These depictions were frequently both gendered and racialized, invoking a sanitized ‘attractive colonial history’ that simplified and classified Latin American culture and society to suit the needs of the organization.

The second part of the article goes on to discuss the potential of the theoretical insights that the authors use earlier in the article. The work of Gloria Anzaldúa – specifically *Borderlands/La frontera – the new mestiza* – is central to this section of the article (Anzaldúa’ 1987). This book is semi-autobiographical and is an account of how a lesbian Chicana woman experienced the effects of centuries of colonialism among the Chicano communities in the American South-West, living in lands that had been sequentially appropriated by Spanish and then ‘American’ (United States) colonizers. In the opening pages of that account can be found how business played a continuing role in an ongoing process of exploitation. Anzaldúa describes how in the 1930s agribusiness ‘cheated the small Chicano landowners of their land [and then] the corporations hired gangas of mexicanos to pull out the brush, chaparral and catus to irrigate the desert (Anzaldúa’ 1987, 9’). This physical transformation of the land to enable extraction on an industrial scale has been repeated widely in colonized lands. These changes in California forced Anzaldúa’s father to become a sharecropper, and the family worked to repay the loan that enabled the family to sharecrop, so further structurally embedding the family into a system of unequal economic exchange. The company even took recipes from the women who lived on the sharecropped farms and made them into a book. This is the exploitation of land and labor, and the appropriation of knowledge, that decolonial writers such as Quijano and others discuss.
Borderlands/La frontera is not mainly about business, of course. It is a critical and discursive text and a mixture of prose and poem. It switches between English and Spanish and is far from the microeconomic foundations of business history. The use of such a complex and literary text by Pauldi et al. in the production of an article about management history, however, demonstrates the multiple ways in which knowledge about the history of business and management can be approached, but also the widening and deepening of theoretical perspectives that can be employed to think (and re-think, perhaps) the history of imperialism, in all its forms. Paludi et al. use the text as means of opening up a critical discussion about how colonialism has a long arc in time, with multiple chronologies that emerge from the complex social interactions, societies and cultures, that themselves were wrought from an experience of empire or empires.

The core aim of Wanderley and Barros is to critique the critical approach, or levels of criticism, within the ‘historic-turn’ in Management and Organization studies. Their argument is that in order for the historic-turn to be more fully critically engaged, it needs to include authors, theories, concepts, objects and themes from ‘other geographies’ and to move beyond the Anglo-Saxon world of ideas. They seek to encourage Management and Organization Studies (MOS) to adopt a more nuanced understanding of where systems of knowledge come from and how historical investigation itself can be a critical means of establishing this.

The central argument presented by Wanderley and Barros is that the ‘presentist’ critique of MOS cannot only be considered as the absence of adequate temporal and historical understanding and contextualization in management theory and knowledge (important as this is) but also must consider whether the knowledge (re)produced by the historic-turn itself fails to critique the ideological and discursive presentism inherent in the production of that knowledge to begin with. In so doing, the authors point to the possibility that such knowledge would nonetheless ‘remain in the extended past of the domination of Anglo-Saxon knowledge’ because of its conceptual and theoretical anchoring in a distinct canon that does not include modes of thought and ways of knowing outside of the Anglo-Saxon or western European origins of management knowledge. This perspective is expressly ‘decolonial’ rather than postcolonial. Wanderly and Barros eschew Marxist, Foucauldian or Actor-Network Theory critical approaches for that reason. This itself is a critique that scholars operating within critical genres in relation to historical research in Management and Organization history will have to absorb.

Wanderly and Barros begin by discussing the dependence theory and the traditional of Latin American critical thought. They argue that the development of the decolonial theoretical tradition should be seen as prefiguring the historic-turn in MOS or, indeed, ‘be considered as the launch of the Historic Turn within Management and Organisation Knowledge’. The authors show how Latin American social thought contributed to subsequent postcolonial and critical discourses. They explore the role that the US played in exporting ‘epistemologies and practices’ in the context of the Cold War and how this was incorporated within system of thought in Latin America. Here, the authors use the concept of ‘anthropophagy’, meaning in this sense the figurative ‘eating’ or digestion of Western ideas by Brazilian scholars, in so doing enabling unique Brazilian social knowledge to develop. The authors also critique the influence of Alfred Chandler on business
They argue that Chandler’s work propagated ‘market fundamentalism and, consequently, put state-led, but also family, small and medium businesses in a subaltern position’. In contrast, they point to a growing field of Latin American business history which explores wider concerns. They call for more work in the field of the ‘historic-turn’, which engages with the growing breadth of business history work on Latin America that goes beyond the Chandlerian tendencies of the field. Additionally, they argue that there could be further research that examines the historical roots of slavery and the ‘dark side’ of organization in Latin America and how this contributed to the growth the economic, social and political systems of oppression.

The final article in this Special Issue is by White on ‘Ungentlemanly capitalism’ that takes as its starting point the historiographical theory of imperialism developed by Cain and Hopkins (2002, 1994). Their work was both meta-historical and synthetic, drawing on a vast reading on the history of the British empire to develop the theoretical constructs. The central argument of this theory is that a nexus of the British aristocracy and financial elites came to dominate metropolitan institutions of economic power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Building on the idea of J.A. Hobson relating to the connection between international investment and imperial development, Cain and Hopkins were to argue that the export of capital around the globe, with the City of London as its financial fulcrum, developed and structured a political economy of British imperialism with the so-called ‘gentlemanly capitalists’ at its core. This elite integrated together financiers, members of the British establishment in the metropole and colonial officials in the periphery to grease the wheels of imperial commerce and colonialism in practice. Collectively, this group were able to organize investment around the globe, often situated in colonies run by sympathetic official, to produce goods that were traded throughout the British empire. At the centre of this interpretation is the primacy of the metropolitan service economy. Cain and Hopkins’ sought to maintain the unity of their explanation across the British imperial system from 1688 to 1997. This theory of imperialism has been much debated in the literature (for example, see Daunton 1989; Dumett 1999).

White’s central argument is that the business career of Sir John Hay – a rubber baron running plantations in Malaya – stands in counterpoint to the dominant narrative of ‘gentlemen’ capitalists acting in close cooperation with colonial authorities. Based on rich archival research, White demonstrates that Hay was not a ‘gentleman’ in the Cain and Hopkins’ conception of the term and did not maintain harmonious or cooperative relationships with Whitehall or colonial officials in Malaya and often had a fractious relationship with financial interests in the City of London. White uses this analysis to emphasize that consular and governmental interests in colonial economics across decolonization were important factors, and the plausibility of ‘gentlemanly capitalism’ as a general or universal theory of the British empire frays when applied to the case of Malaya across the period decolonization. White also makes a further historiographical contribution in challenging the applicability of the assumptions underpinning the relevance of the historiography of the ‘Free-Standing Company’ to a proper understanding of the business organizations of the British empire, in line with emerging work that field also (see Mollan 2018). White’s article also demonstrates how empirical historical work can be used to reflect on, question, fine and refute existing theoretical notions.

What all the articles here point to is the ongoing potential – already realized in a great deal of management and organization history – for historical research to
contribute to theoretical understanding, to theory building and to the refinement of theory, including theories that emerge from historical research. As such, this Special Issue further contributes to Management and Organization History as a prime venue for theoretically informed work of that kind (Miskell 2018). The articles here are also exemplars that demonstrate the value of business and management history that tackles topics that are contextualized by, or form part of, wider and deeper socioeconomic or sociopolitical phenomena of both contemporary and historical importance – in this case, the process and legacies of imperialism and coloniality.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References**


