

Editorial

With this issue, *Comparativ* includes three new features. Firstly, in a short intro the editors of the journal relate themes and arguments of the single issue to the wider programmatic concerns of *Comparativ*. Since its founding in 1991, the journal has published new research on world and global history at the crossroads of a wide range of area studies by means of thematic issues in which a selection of articles presents one topic from different and yet integrated angles. In this way, *Comparativ* serves to bring joint inquiries to the fore and provides a forum for collaborative studies on connections and comparisons along the many scales that have become relevant for the flows of past and present people, ideas and goods as well as for the ever renewed attempts to control such fluidity. Secondly, we complement our book review section with an annotation section that provides an increasing number of shorter summaries of newly released works. In doing so, we respond to the growing number of monographs and edited volumes that make it increasingly more difficult to gain an overview of, select and assign books for reviewing. Thirdly, *Comparativ* has been incorporated into the DOI system, which assigns persistent identifiers to the single article to increase the integration into as well as retrieval from digital databases and library catalogues.

This special issue presents global perspectives on empires and imperial constellations, which aim at feeding into the current lively discussion about the place of empires in world and global history as much as in the social sciences and history at large. This discussion reacts to a dual observation: On the one hand, and for a long time, social scientists and scholars from the humanities have taken for granted that the era of empire is over and done with and that historical development was a directed process “from nation-state to empire”. On the other hand, ‘empire’ was a frequently used trope in public debates about imperialist behaviour and in fact continues to be. Military interventions have been seen through this lens, and international organizations have been criticized for imperial(ist) politics while many one-to-one interstate relations also often appear as

imperial in nature. The articles collected here somehow parallel the effort made by the authors in a book on empire and the social sciences recently edited by Jeremy Adelman (London: Bloomsbury 2019).

What we can learn from the recent interest in imperial histories is that we obviously miss an important part of modern history when reducing statehood to the national, which large parts of the social sciences do when remaining attached to the context of their foundation during the emergence of nation-states in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is particularly interesting since it is exactly the ambition of social sciences to find explanations at a world level and not only at national level. But to analyse societies and economies as national containers driven mainly by their internal tensions and contradictions is not enough to grasp the impact of border-transcending entanglements and connections that were to a large extent organized by empires. It is therefore no wonder that the renewed interest in imperial histories and imperialism – and the role social scientists played within this framework to make the empire work – went hand in hand with the rise of global histories since the 1990s.

But, of course, empires are not fixed entities either; they have seen as much transformation as other spatial formats. The empires of the Atlantic world are quite different from what imperialist behaviour today insists on calling an empire of the twenty-first century. A decisive turning point, so it seems to us, was the revolutionary period after 1776 when Europe as well as the Americas saw empires dissolving under the attacks of nation-builders who ironically right from the beginning distinguished between new principles at home and the continuation of imperial features – including enslavement and other forms of coerced labour – in the colonies where citizenship was denied to the unfree.

This fundamental transformation, at the same time, secured the establishment of nation-states and the survival of empires so that a new spatial format emerged that can be called a nation-state with imperial extension. This hybrid format has seen a successful career at least until the times of decolonization. Success means that the most ambitious hegemonic powers of the world since the 1820s used this format to organize their positioning in the world and their ways of controlling global flows. To study the variants of this format over time and space may help us to overcome the often lamented methodological nationalism, to overcome the simplistic opposition of Eurocentric and postcolonial perspectives and to better understand global integration as an asymmetric process.

None of these imperial configurations was able or even intending to integrate the whole world, instead integrating its very specific world of transregional linkages but never with a planetarian scope. Studying empires therefore can also be an invitation to understand global processes as the result of competing globalization projects instead of misinterpreting globalization as a natural process without alternatives. At the same time, we may better understand why resistance to global integration often uses the rhetoric of independence and sovereignty – given the imperial(ist) experience many people in the world had been confronted with.

Matthias Middell / Katja Naumann