

Empires in Current Global Historiography

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There is no doubt: empires strike back, not only in history but also in historiography. This famous expression of colonies that impact the (former) imperial metropolis has been inspired by the manifold experiences coming from the everyday presence of people, material resources, and cultural patterns circulating across imperial spaces. The renewed, and surprisingly growing, interest in the study of empires by historians – as well as far beyond a narrow institutional understanding of the discipline – takes inspiration from a whole series of observations. The old narrative “from empire to nation”, which reflected the ideas of historians at the end of the nineteenth century as well as during the moments of massive decolonization, now seems outdated. The nation-state is obviously not the only and final stage in world history – replacing everything that came before. This insight is fed both by the observation that nation-states are not the only spatial format with which societies react to the global condition – both at the end of the nineteenth as well as during the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first centuries – and by the disillusionment with the failed dream of anti-colonial activists that the declaration of independence would mean immediate sovereignty over the definition of transregional connectedness. Decolonization, on the contrary, turned out to be a lengthy and painful process leading to different forms of dependency than those existing during the colonial era but not to what the myth of the sovereign nation-state promised. The debate about ongoing economic connectedness at times of state independence¹ has promoted the idea that worldwide capitalism may function as an all-encompassing empire within which the individual nationalized state and society lose importance – as well as freedom to choose

1 T. Bierschenk/E. Spies (Hrsg.), 50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit in Afrika. Kontinuitäten, Brüche, Perspektiven, Köln 2012.

their own way in dealing with global capital flows.² The idea of empire propagated by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri has only influenced the discussion for a short time since the metaphorical use of empire in this interpretation – despite the reference to debates about imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century – has not convinced that many historians. Their idea of empire was too much part of an ideology of globalization that had its “fifteen minutes of fame” in the 1990s, insisting on a couple of arguments: there is a completely new situation in the world due to now overmighty globalization, which there is no real alternative to and which makes necessary the development of a completely new societal analysis in order to invent a new type of interpretation as well as to invent (and political create) new anti-systemic forces to challenge the recently emerged power relations.

Part of the ambitious new interpretation of the world was to declare the nation-state dead³ and no longer a meaningful framework of struggle between various social forces.⁴ This globalization ideology, which by far was a perspective not only of the left⁵ but also among mainstream liberals and conservatives, met resistance from those who argued that the nation-state still remained a major theatre of social conflict and/or resistance to tensions emanating from global and transregional entanglements.

Slowly, historians also began to address the challenge that was embedded in this globalization ideology by insisting on globalization being not so much a new thing but a long-lasting process that gave birth to very different features over time. Global history – which undoubtedly is based on the long tradition of world history writing – received new societal relevance because it became an essential part of a very fundamental debate across the world: Do we share the discourse of newness that was characteristic of that globalization ideology or do we insist on the long historicity of globalization? If the latter, then of course the issue of diachronic comparison comes to the fore and historical research gains new importance as a way to interpret the present and forecast the immediate and long-term future. It is evident that historians are not good at predicting such a future, but they may provide historical references together with the context for a (cautious) reapplication – as it happened with the term empire. In a world that was no longer organized into stable blocs separated from one another by an iron curtain and based upon the principle of (more or less sovereign) nation-states, uncertainty emerged concerning the spatial configuration of world order. It is clear that the transformative process towards a new world order – or rather orders in the plural – takes time, and from the beginning, the outcome of such a process is not yet clear. Nevertheless, the slowly emerging structure needs a language to describe these orders even before they can be completely

2 M. Hardt / A. Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2000.

3 K. Ōmae, *The End of the Nation State. The Rise of Regional Economies*, New York 1995.

4 M. Albrow/R. Fellingner, *Abschied vom Nationalstaat. Staat und Gesellschaft im globalen Zeitalter*, Frankfurt a. M. 1998.

5 On the contrary, it found its first worldwide remarked expression in the famous controversy between Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington about the new situation after the end of Cold War – both definitively beyond any suspicion of being part of any kind of left.

understood. A multitude of terms have been tested and some have survived the public debate over their applicability better than others. “Region” is always a candidate since it lacks any precise meaning when it comes to the scale at which a region is identified. It can be both a substate region and a region that encompasses more than one or two states; it can also be used to characterize territorial units crossing borders, and one can even take the frontier as a specific form of a region. Region can be used for territories with clearly drawn borders surrounding a coherent physical space, but they can also be characterized by fuzzy limitations. The term region has the advantage of being useable in almost all dimensions of human interaction – there are economic as well as linguistic, cultural, and administrative ones as well as many more. A region might be connected to power and authority, but this is not a necessary component of the meaning given to regions.

Therefore, the apparent advantage of the term “region” at times of uncertainty concerning the emerging new spatial order turns into a disadvantage. While the “regional” was already used in the 1990s when it comes to the description of alternatives to the national, other terms remained attractive as well – among them, evidently the notion of empire. Historians and those searching for historical references started testing if this particular term carries a meaning that represents an alternative to the world that was lost with the end of the Cold War. This process can be understood as a sequence of attempts that placed individual layers of meaning on the term empire, thereby carrying more or less strong resonance in the social debate.

To understand, global capitalism as empire has turned the relationship between transformations in finance and economy, on the one hand, and in the political organization of societies, on the other hand, somehow upside down. Modern capitalism appears to be borderless and only to be understood as a global system – just as an ever-expanding empire. In a way, this builds on the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, who, however, had been much more careful with the term empire because he had anchored his study of the world system to a detailed analysis of early modern economic and state development.⁶ Although the book by Hardt and Negri gave the term empire not only new prominence but also a critical connotation, they followed, to some extent, Karl Marx in his dialectical thinking about capitalism, which they (like him) characterized as exploitative, on the one hand, and as unavoidably expanding, on the other hand.

In this perspective, empire remained a metaphor for expansion towards planetarian coverage and not very much more. The terminological confusion of empire and capitalism as a global economic order, however, encountered other strands of the debate, especially the one regarding the USA as the only remaining superpower after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This led to the question if the USA is the new empire governing the world and guaranteeing its (democratic and capitalist) order. While some answered that

6 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*. vol. I: *Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, London 1974; vol. II: *Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750*, New York et al. 1980; vol. III: *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730–1840s*, San Diego et al. 1989.

question with a list of recommendations to the US administration what it could learn from historical attempts by empires such as the British one in the nineteenth century to organize worldwide hegemony,⁷ others were more careful with historical parallels and insisted on the new situation within which the US played their role at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁸

Another dimension of interest in empires had to do less with capitalism and international relations and more with increasing mobility and the resulting diversity within societies as a consequence of globalization. Sociologists, like Ulrich Beck, predicted that deterritorializing effects of global processes and the increasing power of transnational companies escaping any control by state authorities would undermine the strict framework of nation-states together with their arrangements for welfare and of democracy and would in the end rather repeat patterns that had been typical for early modern societies (e.g. empires).⁹ This interpretation calls to mind a triptych, with the nation-state and its strong capacity to exercise control via territorialization over its population in the middle, but the pre-national/-imperial history before the emergence of the nation-states on the left is more likely to become the blueprint for the future situated on the right.¹⁰

Beck's sociology resonated not only with his British colleagues but also with developments in the field of geography, where a new political geography shattered existing paradigms in its own discipline and more specifically in the field of international relations. John Agnew has argued that it is no longer sufficient to remain in what he calls a "territorial trap"¹¹ and to imagine the world as being covered by competing and interacting but above all sovereign states. He has demonstrated how much other disciplines depend on innovation within geography. This was echoed by a strong and growing constructivist strand within geography,¹² becoming step by step a larger movement now called the spatial turn and impacting the humanities and social sciences in the one way or the other.¹³ The central argument is that this spatial turn, with its claim that space does not

7 N. Ferguson, *Empire. The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, New York 2002; N. Ferguson, *Colossus. The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, London 2005.

8 C. J. Calhoun/F. Cooper/K. W. Moore, *Lessons of Empire. Imperial Histories and American Power*, New York 2006; C. S. Maier, *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

9 U. Beck (Hrsg.), *Politik der Globalisierung*, Frankfurt a. M. 1998, pp. 10–19.

10 U. Beck, *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus – Antworten auf Globalisierung*, Frankfurt a. M. 2002, pp. 24–47. This rather pessimistic interpretation goes hand in hand with an attempt to show sociological interpretation a way out of its methodological nationalism and to become fit for future debates about a renewal of democracy and global citizenship.

11 J. Agnew, *The Territorial Trap. The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory*, in: *Review of International Political Economy* 1 (1994) 1, pp. 53–80.

12 As a short summary: B. Werlen, *Andere Zeiten - Andere Räume? Zur Geographie der Globalisierung*, in: M. Ott/E. Uhl (eds.), *Denken des Raums in Zeiten der Globalisierung*, Münster 2005, pp. 57–72; B. Werlen/T. Brennan (eds.), *Society, Action and Space. An Alternative Human Geography*, London 1993.

13 J. Döring/T. Thielmann (eds.), *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften*, Bielefeld 2008; B. Warf/S. Arias (eds.), *Spatial Turn. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London 2009; M. Middell/K. Nauermann, *Global History and the Spatial Turn. From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalisation*, in: *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010), pp. 149–170; F. Williamson, *The Spatial Turn in Social History: A Review of Recent Research Trends*, in: *European History Quarterly* (2014), pp. 703–717.

exist per se but is produced by and during social interaction, would exactly fit the historical moment of uncertainty about future spatial configurations. Globalization – having undermined the seemingly stable order of a hierarchy of scales (from the local via the regional and the national to the international) with the (elites of the) nation-state at the all-controlling centre – invites creative observation and thinking of new products of the space-making activities of individual as well as collective actors. One may doubt from the historian's perspective that this was the first unique point in history where such an uncertainty came to the fore,¹⁴ but this objection does not change much in the general direction of the debate at the beginning of the new millennium. There was a fast-growing interest in transcending the long-lasting obsession with the national and in discovering either new or returning spatial formats.

As a solution to this problem, the new idea of global governance was launched – meaning to many authors involved in the debate the upscaling of regulatory regimes from the national to a (rather under-defined) global level. Undoubtedly, it was not completely new to dream of a world government that overcomes national egoisms and fulfills the expectations of social justice at a larger scale than thus far possible.¹⁵ The United Nations comes to mind, but with the failed reform attempt undertaken by Kofi Annan around the millennium, this ended rather in disillusionment again. Partly in parallel, the discussion of a so-called new regionalism emerged – somehow renewing the interest in regional configurations that had reached its last peak among social scientists and historians in the 1970s. But the new regionalism paradigm was not so much interested in regionalist movements undermining the absolute sovereignty claim of nation-states but rather at looking into possibilities of alliances built by nation-states to regulate or even avoid conflict as well as formulating coordinated answers to challenges emanating from powers and processes outside the region. Since the new regionalism idea was first made use of by political scientists, the central idea of sovereign states sharing rather than losing sovereignty has not been given up, and the connection to the debate over empire has remained loose. However, one can draw a line from the newly discovered relevance of such regional alliances based upon power and sovereignty sharing to three aspects:¹⁶ to the debate about non-national spatial formats that react to a slowly emerging new world

14 Stuart Elden already a couple of years ago insisted on the historicity of a concept such as territory, and one can read the age of revolutions around 1800 as another moment of uncertainty that gave rise to a new spatial semantics around the notions of nation and nation-state, while at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century notions like transnational nation and imperialism indicated another, probably similar, shift. On these different "spatial turns" or moments of respatialization, see S. Elden, *The Birth of Territory*, Chicago 2013; M. Maruschke/ M. Middell (eds.), *The French Revolution as a Moment of Respatialization*, Berlin/Boston 2019; K. K. Patel, *Nach der Nationalfixiertheit. Perspektiven einer transnationalen Geschichte*, Berlin 2004;

15 J. M. Hanhimäki, *The United Nations. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford/New York 2008; M. Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton 2009; E.-M. Muschik, *Managing the World. The United Nations, Decolonization, and the Strange Triumph of State Sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s*, in: *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018) 1, pp. 121–144.

16 J. Agnew, *Sovereignty Regimes: Territoriality and State Authority in Contemporary World Politics*, in: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95 (2005) 2, pp. 437–461.

order (or the perceived need for one), to new forms of capitalism, and to new features of circulation and flows undermining the existing patterns of territorialization.¹⁷

Historians reacted to this public interest in imperial configurations, first of all, with an intensification of research on many different historical cases.¹⁸ The 2010s were particularly rich in new publications on empires, both old and new. Large empires became the subject of global comparison.¹⁹ Colonization and the resulting power asymmetry between metropolises and colonies²⁰ were compared within a larger, and global, spectrum and no longer reduced to the classical Western European examples.²¹ This resulted in a series of global histories of empire²² and undermined the idea that empires belong definitively to the past. It would be too long to list here all the achievements of this recent historiography that has been addressing topics as different as the impact empires and colonial configurations had on knowledge orders, labour regimes, network building and mobility, disease management, and resources mobilized from colonial peripheries for global competition, to name a few. The more we have learned from this literature, the more the idea of an imperial past transforming into a national present has vanished.²³ Legacies and remains of empires are shining through many social realities of today's world. Post-colonialism reminds its readers that colonialism does not end with the formal declaration of state's independence and that it remains a tangible reality not only in the former colonies but also in the former metropolises.

Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper brought these arguments into a coherent interpretation when publishing their world history of empires.²⁴ This history neither ends with

17 S. Marung/M. Middell (eds.), *Spatial Formats under the Global Condition*, Berlin/Boston 2019.

18 For former developments in the field of imperial historiography, see, e.g., Anne Friedrichs, *Das Empire als Aufgabe des Historikers. Historiographie in imperialen Nationalstaaten: Großbritannien und Frankreich 1919–1968*, Frankfurt a. M. 2011; U. von Hirschhausen/J. Leonhard, *Zwischen Historisierung und Globalisierung. Titel, Themen und Trends der neueren Empire-Forschung*, in: *Neue Politische Literatur* 56 (2011) 3, pp. 390–402.

19 P. F. Bang/C. A. Bayly (Hrsg.), *Tributary Empires in Global History*, New York 2011; P. F. Bang/D. Kolodziejczyk (eds.), *Universal Empire. A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, Cambridge/New York 2012; and, finally, as part of this collective research: P. F. Bang/W. Scheidel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, New York 2013.

20 F. Cooper/A. L. Stoler, *Between Metropole and Colony. Rethinking a Research Agenda*, in: F. Cooper (ed.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley 1997, pp. 1–56.

21 K. Barkey/M. von Hagen (eds.), *After Empire. Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires*, Boulder 1997; A. Etkind, *Internal Colonization. Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge 2011; O. Bartov/E. D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, Bloomington 2013; B. Gainot/M. Vaghi (eds.), *Les Indes orientales au carrefour des empires*, Paris 2014; R. Crowley, *Conquerors. How Portugal Seized the Indian Ocean and Forged the First Global Empire*, New York 2015; S. Faruqi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World around It*, London 2004; C. Aydin, *Regionen und Reiche in der politischen Geschichte des langen 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: S. Conrad/J. Osterhammel (eds.), *1750–1870. Wege zur modernen Welt*, München 2016, pp. 35–253.

22 J. Frémeaux, *Les empires coloniaux dans le processus de mondialisation*, Paris 2002; J. D. , *After Tamerlan. The Global History of Empire*, London/New York 2007; J. Darwin, *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970*, Cambridge 2011.

23 J. Esherick/H. Kayali/E. van Young (eds.), *Empire to Nation. Historical Perspectives on the Making of the Modern World*, Lanham, MD 2006.

24 J. Burbank/F. Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, NJ 2010.

nationalization nor with decolonization,²⁵ and neo-imperial policies of the 2010s – be it on the Crimean Peninsula or in the Near East – seems to confirm this lesson.

But when there is no longer a unidirectional pathway from former features of statehood to the nation-state, then the interest in these former features becomes legitimate again. This has led to discussions about the appropriateness of imperial features in managing diversity as a possible answer to the growing importance of mobility, mixed societies, and interwoven or hybrid identities. Whereas this strand of debate seems to place empire in a rather positive light and puts emphasis on its flexibility in managing social constellations characterized primarily by diversity, the opposite is also true and has been highlighted by studies on the German Reich²⁶ or Stalin's Soviet Union as (failed) empires,²⁷ which insisted on exercising disproportionate (or even genocidal) violence and oppressive features in holding the empire together.

The debate led to two major characteristics that have been brought to the fore again and again in the many studies about individual empires. The first was their expansion through conquests and the incorporation of areas as a result of wars, dynastic marriages, and settlements. Already the great empires of antiquity were compared to the previously dominating city-states as wide-ranging domains, admired for how they dominated their respective hemisphere. However, this was always accompanied by the warning not to overstretch such a dominance. The larger the lands imperial elites held under their formal control, the more they became dependent on an ever-increasing (and costly) military apparatus as well as on the collaboration of local elites – both elements that have served as an explanation for the decline of empires.

Such warnings found legitimation in the second characteristic of empires, which speaks against a long-term preservation of the wide area of rule: empires are based on legal inequality of their inhabitants. The privileges of a core population correlated with the oppression and dependent legal situation of many of the peripheral populations that came to the empire through conquests and colonization. This legal depriveleging had increasing consequences when mobility between the peripheries and the centres of empires became greater and speeded up. The management of such differences turned out to be ever more complicated and visibly discriminating, thereby mobilizing discontent. These two characteristics led to a contradictory relationship between empires and territorialization, which was relatively slow until the eighteenth century. Out of necessity, empires build administrations and infrastructures. However, these primarily serve the military control of the area ruled and the primacy of military and dynastic interests, even though the transport of economic goods and the political integration of provinces also

25 M. Thomas/A. S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: From "High Imperialism" to Decolonisation*, in: *The International History Review* 36 (2014) 1, pp. 142–170; M. Thomas/A. S. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford 2018.

26 As an overview: S. Baranowski, *Nazi Empire. German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler*, Cambridge/New York 2011.

27 V. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Chapel Hill 2007.

became stimulated. During most of their existence, empires build on the great independence of their provinces and subareas.²⁸

The expansion of empires has repeatedly not only met political resistance but also intellectual opposition, which emphasizes the illegitimacy of an order based on legal inequality. The criticism of the enslavement of the Indians already started with Las Casas in the sixteenth century, and this criticism intensified in the eighteenth century up until the destruction of France's imperial past as an *ancien régime* to be definitively overcome, which was contrasted with the sovereignty and equality of rights of all citizens established by the revolution. However, just a few years after the storming of the Bastille, the ideas of equality and freedom combined perfectly with the conquering strategies under Napoleon's renewed imperial rule,²⁹ and already since the early part of 1790, planters tried to turn the argument of freedom and autonomy towards a new legitimation of slavery. Against the expectations, the result of the French Revolution was therefore, paradoxically, not the format of a nation-state, which guaranteed all its citizens equality before the law but instead a (long-term toxic) mixture of popular sovereignty and continuation of imperial practices for the expanse of a renewed colonial empire: nation-state cum empire, so to speak.

France does not stand alone in this respect. The British Empire, which emerged after the Seven Years' War,³⁰ has not even hidden its imperial character³¹ in the name and the tension between the national and the imperial remains to this day (with the open Irish question becoming acute again due to the hard Brexit) a fundamental ambivalence. Spain and Portugal also insisted at the Congress of Vienna that the abolition of slave trade should only be fixed for territories north of their own possessions on the West African coast,³² and they remained, despite all the liberal revolutions of the 1820s and independence successes in Latin America, a mixture of nation-state and empire.³³ Dynasties and parliaments found long-lasting compromises in constitutional monarchies.³⁴ But even republics did not give up their imperial expansion into so-called empty areas – as the American settlement in the West of the continent shows.³⁵

28 P. Perdue, *Boundaries, Maps, and Movement: Chinese, Russian, and Mongolian Empires in Early Modern Central Eurasia*, in: *International History Review* 20 (1988), pp. 263–286; J. Sand, *Subaltern Imperialists: The New Historiography of the Japanese Empire*, in: *Past and Present* (2014) 225, pp. 273–288.

29 C. Belaubre/J. Dym/J. Savage (eds.), *Napoleon's Atlantic. The Impact of Napoleonic Empire in the Atlantic World*, Leiden 2010.

30 F. McLynn, *1759. The Year Britain became Master of the World*, New York 2004.

31 G. B. Magee/A. S. Thompson (eds.), *Empire and Globalisation. Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c. 1850–1914*, Cambridge/New York 2010.

32 H. Duchhardt, *Der Wiener Kongress. Die Neugestaltung Europas 1814/15*, München 2013, pp. 94–96.

33 G. B. Paquette, *Imperial Portugal in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions: The Luso-Brazilian World, c. 1770–1850*, Cambridge 2013.

34 J. Leonhard/U. von Hirschhausen, *Empires und Nationalstaaten im 19. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2009; G. D. Schäd, *Compting Forms of Globalization in the Middle East: From the Ottoman Empire to the Nation State, 1918–1967*, in: A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Global History. Interactions between the Universal and the Local*, Basingstoke/New York 2006, pp. 191–228.

35 F. Schumacher, *Reclaiming Territory. The Spatial Contours of Empire in US History*, in: Marung/Middell (eds.), *Spatial Formats*, pp. 107–148.

This became the basis of the second wave of modern colonization, emerging around 1870. Now also newly formed nation-states like Germany and Italy sought their place in the sun and strived to gain colonies.³⁶ And they certainly did so under the impression that the contemporaries regarded nation-state cum empire as the more efficient type of state when it came to influencing the world order.³⁷

In 1918, Lenin and Wilson seemed to have marked an end point to this history.³⁸ Many people hoped for the promised decolonization, which they perceived to be embedded in the concept of the right to self-determination of the peoples, considered to be opposed to the logic of imperialism. This turned out to be an illusion, even if the losers of the First World War had to temporarily renounce their imperial extensions. But they were already back as global players in the 1930s and especially Japan, Italy, and Germany tried again to build murderous empires.³⁹

The United Nations was founded in 1945 on the principle of an equality of nations but gave its central founding members – with their right to veto in the Security Council – a double-edged sword, which could be used not only to maintain the world order, but also to protect their own expansion spaces and the development of a respective hemisphere.⁴⁰ Decolonization therefore progressed slowly and the Cold War era was first and foremost a conflict between two superpowers with global spheres of influence, which were often treated like imperial supplementary areas, especially in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa.⁴¹

The idea that the 1989 revolution would end this spatial format with the dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later turned out to be a premature vision again.⁴² New conflicts inspire new imperial ambitions as the wars of the last two decades in Central Asia, the Middle East, or Eastern Europe demonstrate. What has changed, and is still changing, is the context of such a spatial format: technology makes classical borders of territory more and more porous and resource distribution (from energy supply to industrial sites, from working infrastructures to human resources, which increasingly become the central issue in knowledge societies) is so unequal that it increasingly collides with

36 S. Conrad/J. Osterhammel, *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914*, Göttingen 2004; S. Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, München 2006; E. R. Dickinson, *The German Empire: an Empire?*, in: *History Workshop Journal* (2008) 66, pp. 129–162; S. Berger/A. Miller (eds.), *Nationalizing Empires*, Budapest 2015.

37 R. A. Butlin, *Geographies of Empire. European Empires and Colonies, c. 1880–1960*, Cambridge/New York 2009.

38 B. Meissner, *Lenin und das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Völker*, in: *Osteuropa* 20 (1970), pp. 245–261; E. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, New York 2007; about the difficulties to characterize the Soviet Union properly: R. Suny/T. Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford 2001.

39 R. Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire. Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922–1943*, Cambridge 2017.

40 A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire. A Global History*, Princeton 2018.

41 D. C. Engerman, *The Second World's Third World*, in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12 (2011) 1, pp. 183–211; F. Cooper, *Citizenship, Inequality, and Difference. Historical Perspectives*, Princeton 2018.

42 Q. Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Harvard 2018.

traditional means of territorialization that were developed within agrarian and early industrial societies.

As a consequence, empires have seen a steady transformation and their relationship with territorialization has changed dramatically over time. To grasp some of the major trends found in these transformations was the intention of a workshop held in Leipzig in September 2018. It was the product of a continuing fruitful cooperation between the Global History Centre at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, under the strong leadership of Alessandro Stanziani, and the Leipzig Research Centre Global Dynamics. Some of the papers presented at the workshop were reworked by the authors in the light of the stimulating comparative debate that took place. While empire has become an object of intensified interest in many historiographies, there are still important differences in the focus of empirical work and historiographical references. Archives in different countries give access to different empires, and this may facilitate differently designed comparisons. The time that has passed since decolonization in France and Germany is different, and therefore the colonial past has an impact that differs too. The writing of imperial histories consequently has deeper or shorter roots, feeds different narratives, and uncovers different facets of global history, which is the shared horizon of this collective effort. To complement such perspectives and to make comparisons across the boundaries of continents and historical epochs was the first goal of the successfully achieved cooperation.

But there is more to it. Global history as a field cannot limit itself to traditional comparison, where the entities to be compared are conceptualized as largely isolated from each other. On the contrary, global history starts from the assumption that societies are increasingly interdependent and entangled and that mobility leads to the growing circulation of people and, as a consequence, of cultural patterns. Already in his famous speech on comparative history at a congress in 1928 in Oslo,⁴³ Marc Bloch addressed this issue by insisting on the fact that we have to fundamentally distinguish between a (relative easy) comparison that focuses on two or more cases being independent from each other and the (much more complex and challenging) form of comparison that takes into consideration the multiple entanglements between the objects compared. The contributions to this issue present various ways to cope with this challenge and to compare imperial configurations that are undoubtedly connected to each other through the migration of actors and circulating objects as well as mutual observation and the resulting learning processes.

The first article by Gabriela Goldin Marcovich and Silvia Sebastiani guides us back to the Atlantic world's empires⁴⁴ but looks at it from the angle of newly emerging voices claiming authority for the interpretation of history and society in the Americas. The ex-

43 M. Bloch, *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes*, in: *Revue de synthèse historique* 46 (1928), pp. 15–50.

44 J. M. Fradera, *The Imperial Nation. Citizens and Subjects in the British, French, Spanish, and American Empires*, Princeton, Oxford 2018.

amples of Francisco Javier Clavijero, who wrote a monumental *Storia antica del Messico* (1780/81) and José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez, who edited the *Gazeta de literatura de México* (1784–1795) in Mexico City (the capital of New Spain) and who commented on Clavijero's history for never publishing a Spanish edition serve the purpose to bring to the fore the enormous transformations the Spanish (as well as other European) empire(s) underwent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. By following the traces of these important enlightenment figures, we are introduced to the first period of decolonization and the breakdown of empires in modern history. It became a challenge to the knowledge order established over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it was obviously not the end of imperial experiences and circumstances in Central America. Alzate, who tried (unsuccessfully) to enter the intellectual landscape of Spanish enlightenment at times when Humboldt sparked massive interest in knowledge about the Americas, saw his ambition to be published in Madrid vanish with the increasing tensions within the Bourbon empire. In the 1820s, however, his texts were finally published in London, where the victorious empire of a decades-long competition systematized knowledge about the formal and informal parts of its imperial zone of influence. Creole insights were now considered important, especially those about Mexico, which was seen as a potential hub of global trade. The same holds true for Clavijero's history of Mexico, which, after its publication in London, became a source for British imperialism, and it was later used in its subsequent Mexican editions as an intellectual component of the emerging Mexican state-building. With these two exemplary cases, we see very clearly scientists with their intellectual production at the service of changing imperial configurations before and after the great transformation of the Atlantic world. But what had been useful for the expansion of empires later became reread and appropriated for the purpose of a slow nation-building.

Yaruipam Muivah and Alessandro Stanziani turn the page from intellectual history of empires to the question of labour relations and they compare two important cases of nineteenth-century empire-building, namely British India and French Congo with regard to the effect of abolition. The old discussion about the reasons, ways, size, and consequences of discontinuing first slave trade and later on the use of slaves in the many situations, ranging from plantations to households⁴⁵ to many more, cannot be solved by general assumptions. Instead, it is only through careful reconstruction of the local and regional configurations – because there were so many legal possibilities to continue manumission of all kinds, as we know in much more detail from global labour history – that a truly insightful approach can be taken.⁴⁶ The two case studies first of all confirm the contradictory character of abolition in the colonies, both British and French. Whereas the transformation towards double free proletarians became over the nineteenth century a universally accepted norm in the metropolises that made enslavement and slavery a

45 See the impressive overview of the historical varieties of slavery provided by M. Zeuske, *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei. Eine Globalgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin/Boston 2019.

46 M. van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Leiden/Boston 2008.

shameful act – and an argument now turned against the Indians and Africans in terms of civilizing missions necessary before they may be allowed to become independent – the opposite development had to be observed in the colonies where a weak colonial state declared to be forced to accept local customs. The legal heterogeneity of empires, which was always one of the main characteristics of this spatial format, transformed into an even more contradictory combination of different (and in fact mutually exclusive) norms concerning the rights and the freedom of people living the space of what was called an empire. The article addresses the labour relations within such a space, but the conclusions go beyond that social dimension of the late nineteenth-century realities. Empires had changed (or were about to change) into nation-states with imperial extensions – openly accepting the contradictions between the legal foundations of its different parts. The gap between these parts were covered, on the one hand, by legitimating discourses full of racism and Eurocentric hubris and, on the other hand, by violent oppression of emancipatory ambitions.

Margot Lyautey and Marc Elie combine forces to compare the German Reich's expansion to the west in 1940 and to the east a year later. In both cases, food provision for the German population – and the troops needed to establish and secure the new colonialism – became a central issue and provides the opportunity to compare methods and consequences of the massive requisition of grain and other foodstuff. The underlying dream of an autarkic continental economy and the planned reduction of the Soviet population by starvation were, as the authors show, distinct features of a nevertheless coherent policy that followed a certain vision of the future German empire. Securing food supply became a geopolitically grounded obsession, against the background of the experience made with blockades during World War I, and many specialists of agriculture were mobilized to plan a new imperial configuration that was organized around the procurement of food and – as a consequence – the dramatic plunder of Eastern Europe with the deadly consequences for the important parts of its population. This method took, without any doubt, inspiration from other forms of colonialism; however, the extreme military and police presence as well as the connectedness of the territories allowed for a much more severe exploitation and control of the occupied land. A large apparatus was established and squeezed grain out of the farmers' lands. However, it became clear already in 1942 that the dream of an autarkic continental economy with a highly industrialized Germany and food-supplying Russia and Ukraine failed and transformed into a nightmare for all those who were not close enough to the privileged military, to the industrial workers (essential for the weapons production), and the Nazi apparatus. The fact that this imperial attempt came with genocide and mass starvation and was only to be stopped by the joint forces of major powers of the world made the price visible people had to pay for these radicalized imperialist dreams.

While addressing a situation many decades later, the article by Ulrike von Hirschhausen and Jonas Kreienbaum deals with a similar constellation as the study of Creole emancipation before and after 1800, which opens this issue, namely the disillusionment with political independence in Africa in the 1960s, which has led to the notion of neo-co-

lonialism. The term, coined by the Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in 1961, mirrors the frustration of the time when formal independence had not resulted in the hoped-for economic development. Nkrumah repeated the rhetorical trick already used by Lenin in his book on imperialism as the latest form of capitalism half a century before and declared neo-colonialism the last stage of imperialism, claiming that final liberation will follow dialectically the current misery. The renewal of the debate about neo-colonialism since the 1990s, however, shows that such hope for immediate change was premature. The term now is used by alter-globalization movements to relate former anti-imperialism with the current critique of a neo-liberal variant of globalization, but the authors demonstrate that such historical analogy produces its flaws. By comparing research on British India in the nineteenth century and Zambia's waltz with international capital in the later twentieth century, they come to the conclusion that economic interventions from outside in both cases remained limited and that their outcome depends much more on indigenous agency than the traditional understanding of neo-colonialism suggests. For our discussion about the many historical variants of empire, we can draw from this rereading of the neo-colonialism debate at least two conclusions. First, there was a shift from a political understanding of imperial rule to one that looks primarily at the economic dimension and loads the notion of empire with the meaning of organized economic exploitation. The agents of such exploitation in many cases are not explicitly mentioned, for example as individual companies or political elites of the former colonial metropolises, but often vaguely addressed as either societies of the North (and thus addressing the complicity even of the worker in the North profiting from the redistributive effects of neo-colonial political economy and global inequality) or international alliances (organized in multinationals⁴⁷ or in institutions like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank governing via credits and "adjustment programmes"⁴⁸). With this shift, second, a transformation of the understanding of empire goes hand in hand, leaving the territoriality of former empires behind and defining them rather as a structural complex than a concrete geographical configuration. Empires have always been characterized by incomplete territorialization and fuzzy borderlands instead of clear-cut borders. Notwithstanding, with the debate about neocolonialism and the primarily economic dimension of power asymmetries involved, empire loses more and more its geographical appearance. One of the effects is that there is no clearly identifiable centre but a multitude of them, and the term empire converges with an understanding of control over (parts of) the world.

Empires, we can conclude from these examples, have survived for much longer than the older historiography assumed, but at the same time they underwent massive transformations and were no longer the empires of medieval or early modern times (or even before).

47 A. Dupont Chandler/B. Mazlish (eds.), *Leviathans. Multinational Corporations and the New Global History*, Cambridge/New York 2005.

48 S. Randeria/A. Eckert (eds.), *Vom Imperialismus zum Empire. Nicht-westliche Perspektiven auf Globalisierung*, Frankfurt a. M. 2009.

The most recent hype around the notion of empire (and its references to the debate about imperialism) indicates that the path of the concept has not yet come to an end. However, empire-building at times of increasing demand for national and even regional independence and autonomy as well as at times of the many overlapping transnational and transregional ties looks quite different from similar activities in the past. Expanding into neighbouring lands and long-lasting annexation of foreign territories becomes more and more the exception.⁴⁹ With the current respatialization of the world that privileges hubs and urban centres of innovation (“global cities”⁵⁰), corridors,⁵¹ and enclaves⁵² over vast territories of “remote areas”,⁵³ the traditional empire-building appears costly and unprofitable. But this, as we know from historical examples, has not hindered people from trying it again.

49 But as cases in the Near East show these exceptions still exist and continue to raise anti-imperialist mobilization.

50 For the conceptualization of these trends, see S. Sassen, *The Global City. Introducing a Concept*, in: *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 11 (2005) 2, pp. 27–43.

51 S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights. From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton 2006.

52 C. Baumann/A. Dietze/M. Maruschke (eds.), *Portals of Globalization in Africa, Asia, and Latin America*, Leipzig 2017.

53 S. Sassen, *When Territory Deborders Territoriality*, in: *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1 (2013) 1, pp. 21–45.