

Jeremy Adelman (ed.): *Empire and the Social Sciences: Global Histories of Knowledge*, London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2019, 233 p.

Reviewed by
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The collection of essays *Empire and the Social Sciences*, edited by Jeremy Adelman, is a pioneering contribution to the intellectual history of social science, which the authors investigate from a transnational and global standpoint. Theoretically, the volume builds on the interpenetration between knowledge and power theorized by Michel Foucault and Edward Said, as well as on Dipesh Chakrabarty's and Bernhard Cohn's explorations of knowledge accumulation and production as key tools of imperial rule. The chapters in this book advance these seminal insights into new and challenging directions by surveying a select number of Western and non-Western social theorists, economists, and policy-makers who, while putting their social scientific interests and enquiries at the service of different empires, not only reformulated the scope and methods of their respective disciplines but also contributed to redefining the aims and practices of imperial domination.

The chapters examine the rise and role of social science's predecessor – political economy – in different contexts: from the Spanish Empire in its mid-eighteenth-century transition from conquest to profitable commercial governance and

exploitation to the British Empire in the early nineteenth century, caught between a free labour and abolitionist rhetoric on the one hand and new justifications for coerced service inspired by the Russian Empire and the Mughal Empire on the other (chapters 1, 2, and 3). In the second half of the twentieth century, on the other side of the world, economy would become a critical tool for questioning imperial legacies of dependency in Latin America (chapter 11). The chapters investigate how geography, by linking men's spatial contexts to issues of ethnicity and war, not only connected the history of the Qing Empire to that of the People's Republic of China but also was instrumental in assigning an unprecedented relevance to imperial "margins" and "peripheries", as in the case of British Burma (chapters 4 and 5). The essays in this book investigate the notion of law emerging from imperial contexts, such as the Chinese Empire, where legal codification did not imply any extirpation of customary practices but was instead built upon them (chapter 6). They detail the notions of empire and imperialism employed, bent, and reformulated to legitimize different Western conceptions of world order, from US imperialism to the German Third Reich, and incorporated into the national and international ambitions of non-Western polities such as the Empire of Japan (chapters 7 and 8). The essays also shed light on philanthropies, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, as productive fields wherein theories of international relations harnessed reform as a crucial tool to achieve a global hegemony (chapters 9 and 10). Overall, the chapters stress the transnational persistence of empire as both an aspiration of and a practice

in international theories from the very beginnings of colonial modernity to the present day (chapter 12).

The book is particularly innovative in how it collectively investigates major conceptual issues through the compelling case studies that each chapter illustrates. All of the chapters more or less explicitly reflect on the theoretical foundations of social science. It is, in fact, from the plural social sciences with which the book deals (political economy, law, geography, and international relations) that the singular “social science” is extracted and distilled, understood not only as a collective term for a constellation of different disciplines but, most importantly, also as a specific way of conceptualizing the role of knowledge. From this perspective, social science’s most important feature appears to be its “worldly” scope: the extraction of information and the production of learning become relevant only when bent to the practical project of “servicing” nations and empires (pp. 1–2). Social science’s constitutive aspiration is, therefore, to make social dynamics not only “knowable”, “intelligible”, and “predictable” but also – and more importantly – “governable”, “mouldable”, and “reformable” (pp. 1–10).

By presenting different categories of “situated” actors dealing with peculiar conditions and contexts, this book emphasizes practical engagement, commitment, and prescription as distinctive components of social science (pp. 215–216). Even though social scientists have often appeared to be fascinated by natural scientists’ ability to formulate universal and objective laws and have from time to time emulated their detached approach, the book suggests that they have historically pursued a much

more ambitious intellectual quest. As they advised rulers on policies at the local and international levels, social scientists applied knowledge production for government and reform purposes; in making studying society instrumental to improving it, they intended not only to describe reality but also to change it.

In this book, this social scientific pursuit is not contextualized within Eurocentric or state-centric spheres that traditionally defined the theatre of social science scholarship but is instead projected onto an expanded horizon populated by competing imperial formations. The global integration brought about by modern empires, which dominated the international scene until at least the end of World War II, induced social scientists willing to serve their countries to “engage the world” and devote their attention to the imperial dynamics on which their own nations’ welfare depended (p. 5). Consequently, social scientists’ contributions to nation-building could not disregard practices of empire-building, including the accumulation of “local contextual” information about unfamiliar places and peoples as the very precondition for the development of government procedures capable of harnessing knowledge about colonies in the interest of the mother country (p. 31).

Social scientists, in fact, proposed categories that rendered the colonial “otherness” thinkable, “manageable”, and, by extension, “improvable” and “civilizable” by the imperial centre (pp. 3, 32). These figures promoted the implementation of techniques to foster successful commerce, conquest, and colonization, and they outlined theories validating political-economic policies, despotic and arbitrary exertions

of power, and “civilizing missions” on the global scale. By turning empires into transnational sites for theoretical observation and practical experimentation, social science contributed to shaping a “global knowledge regime” characterized by the coexistence of a multiplicity of actors who, more or less intentionally, demonstrated that knowledge production was never neutral because it was inseparable from justifications of power relations and from the invention and reproduction of social, racial, and political hierarchies (p. 6).

Rather than conceiving of empire as a mere topographical expansion of the social sciences’ traditional state boundaries, the book adopts empire as a methodological category. This reframing of empire is, indeed, the work’s most original scholarly contribution. While the book’s chapters focus on several empires, its title points to empire as method – an epistemological rather than geographical framework of analysis. Understood this way, the notion of empire subsumes the most distinctive feature common into all historical imperial formations: the fact of being unitary yet not internally uniform.

In empires, aspirations to and accomplishments of unity have coexisted with inner differentiation and fragmentation. Asymmetries in scales (between metropole and colonies, the self-arrogated centre and alleged peripheries), as well as racial and political inequalities forged within imperial structures, could never be reduced to stable hierarchies but instead produced conflictual processes that shaped polycentric assemblages (p. 217). As historical imperial polities, by encapsulating this polycentrism, featured that combination of integration and heterogeneity which

would become the most distinctive characteristic of the global world, empire thus can be understood as an epistemological category that can be employed as a crucial instrument in the methodological toolbox of global history (p. 9). By adopting an imperial perspective that incorporated “home” and “abroad” into a single analytical frame, social scientists historically stimulated the creation of “cross-border systems” of understanding and ruling, which scholars can study as intellectual bricks in the expanding edifice of the “global history of knowledge” (pp. 3–4).

Florian Bieber: Debating Nationalism. The Global Spread of Nations, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 246 S.

Rezensiert von
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Seit den 1980er Jahren hat das Thema Nationalismus in der Wissenschaft Konjunktur und es gibt mittlerweile eine Vielzahl von guten Überblicken, die die zahllosen Debatten und die fast unüberblickbaren empirischen Arbeiten zum Thema verständlich und konzise zusammenfassen. Florian Bieber reiht sich mit seinem Buch in diese Literatur ein.

Die Einleitung bietet eine gute Problematisierung der leider besonders in der Politik immer noch weit verbreiteten, aber eben in die Irre führenden Unterscheidung zwischen Patriotismus und Nationalismus.