EMPIRES OF KNOWLEDGE: EXPERTISE AND IMPERIAL POWER ACROSS THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY

GHI West inaugural workshop at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (UBC), September 15-16, 2017. Co-organized by GHI West (Pacific Regional Office of the German Historical Institute Washington), the Department of History at UBC, and the Department of History at Georgia Institute of Technology. Made possible by the B&B Stern Foundation in Atlanta, GA, the Liu Institute for Global Issues at UBC, the Faculty of Arts and the Department of History at UBC, and Green College on the UBC campus. Conveners: Axel Jansen (GHI Washington), John Krige (Georgia Tech), Jessica Wang (UBC). Participants: Robert Brain (UBC), Jeffrey Byrne (UBC), Julia Cummiskey (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga), Amanda Domingues (Georgia Institute of Technology), Sarah Ehlers (Technical University of Munich), Mark Hendrickson (University of California, San Diego), Prakash Kumar (Pennsylvania State University), David Lazar (GHI Washington), Steven Lee (UBC), David Morton (UBC), Ruth Rogaski (Vanderbilt University), Frederik Schulze (University of Münster / GHI Washington), Suman Seth (Cornell University), Helen Tilley (Northwestern University), Heidi Tworek (UBC), Theresa Ventura (Concordia University), Mari Webel (University of Pittsburgh), Aaron Windel (Simon Fraser University), Andrew Zimmerman (George Washington University).

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. Forms of knowledge such as the gathering and creation of facts about local customs and habit or indigenous power structures 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, think tanks — whose fieldwork aided the projection of power abroad. This included opportunities for expanding research agendas developed at such institutions to include fields of investigation in the colonies.
The inaugural workshop of GHI West, the new Pacific regional office of the GHI Washington, focused on “Empires of Knowledge” and brought together scholars who study different regions of the globe to consider the knowledge/power nexus and explore the roles of experts in developing knowledge about colonial and putatively postcolonial societies as part of the global cultural, economic, and political agendas of metropolitan centers of power from the late nineteenth century to the present. As Jessica Wang pointed out in her welcome remarks, the workshop aptly took place at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people on which the campus is located. The conference got underway with an introduction by John Krige, who suggested several concepts relevant to the investigation of its theme. While empires provided opportunities for investigation by elites in metropolitan centers, Krige suggested, the center-periphery model once favored by historians has been replaced by an emphasis on the plurality of centers and peripheries, allowing for charting multipolar historical relationships. Krige observed that the investigation of intermediaries and of silences in sources required special attention in studying empires of knowledge in order to move from a unidirectional perspective to a fuller picture of colonial relationships.

The workshop format called for discussion of precirculated papers — discussions kicked off by assigned commentators, many of whom joined the group from UBC’s department of history. The papers addressed a broad range of themes in the histories of agriculture, medicine, geology, and engineering in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. They traced continuities from the colonial to the postcolonial periods. While reinforcing the notion of empire as an opportunity for research and for building social capital back “home,” workshop participants also raised the issue of how colonized cultures dealt with colonizers’ knowledge and its associated practices in their own right, a question that proved much harder to assess.

Botanical exchanges, plant inspection and quarantine, and biological control methods for managing insect populations in Hawai’i were the topics of the opening paper by Jessica Wang. In her presentation, she showed how nature and empire are coproduced, emphasizing the important relationship between internationalism and imperialism. She pointed to the collaborative aspects of imperial power and the imperial origins of international science. In Hawai’i, the different efforts to manage the ecosystems reflected the national, intra-imperial,
inter-imperial, and international aspects of the islands’ relationships in the agricultural sciences. In order to pursue their objectives in Hawai’i, agricultural officials depended not only on scientific expertise, but also on bureaucratic, diplomatic, and political relationships, revealing the importance of personal and institutional relationships for the project of empire that made “possible the introduction of plants and seeds and the search for living controls of insect pests in Hawaii in the beginning of the twentieth century.”

Personal and institutional relationships were also crucial for the work of George Becker, a veteran of the United States Geological Survey (USGS), who worked in the Philippines and South Africa in the beginning of the twentieth century. Mark Hendrickson situated Becker in a longer tradition of experts who made a “new” part of the world legible to American and British policymakers and the public: providing information about the land, resources, peoples, and customs to those governments, he helped shape how these “empires” came to understand foreign places. As Hendrickson pointed out, Becker had the role of an intelligence agent: he held official and unofficial roles, crossing the boundaries between being a geologist and a “colonial” official.

Sleeping sickness does not respect boundaries either. In the first decade of the twentieth century, German expeditions arrived in the islands of Ssese in Uganda to start campaigns to control the disease. Mari Webel’s presentation showed how the engagement between Ssese islanders and the Germans’ diagnostic techniques and therapeutic regimens influenced theories of disease control that would be exported throughout German East Africa, serving as a model for widespread colonial intervention around the region. The camp created by the expedition was conceived as a way to isolate people with sleeping sickness from the fly vector and consequently hinder the disease’s spread. One of the images of the camp brought by Webel generated an interesting discussion. The fence, an obvious part of the background in one of the photos Webel presented, made us question locals’ “voluntarism,” especially after we learned that the people who policed the fence did not belong to the same ethnic group as the ones participating in the study. What is very interesting about the photograph, Webel argued, is the actual presence of a fence, in contrast to several images of medical experiments, in which the photographer purposely hid the fences. With that in mind, the group questioned if the bigger question raised by this case is really about colonizing the cure, or if it is about colonizing bodies.
Cure was one of the topics of a second presentation about sleeping sickness. Sarah Ehlers’ paper brought the role of pharmaceutical companies into the picture, explaining that drug use in colonial Africa was not simply the result of a top-down transfer of European products to the tropics under the influence of colonialism. Her main objective was to show the co-constitution of tropical medicine and colonialism, demonstrating that in the same way that sleeping sickness control served the interests of the empire, colonial structures conditioned the production of knowledge. She also made two important points: First, in the history of sleeping sickness in Africa, scientific techniques associated with colonial management strategies morphed into postcolonial development plans. Second, colonized people challenged scientific epistemologies and questioned the authority of colonial medicine in many ways. Africans were said to be passive and active at the same time: passive individuals without any agency to their bodies, but active in terms of embodying the disease, taking the role of vectors.

Efforts of modernization through science were also implemented in Latin America. Frederik Schulze told the story of the construction of Ciudad Guayana, in Venezuela, the main industrial center in the region and a testing ground for an experimentation with American knowledge on urban planning. Schulze showed the conflict-ridden and ambivalent facets of expert knowledge: while Americans viewed Guayana as an experimental site and a business opportunity, Venezuelan planners saw the region as a “repository of resources that could accelerate national development, and generate genuinely national planning knowledge.” Ciudad Guayana is an important case that reveals how Venezuela instrumentalized and appropriated American knowledge for its own political goals, changing unequal power relations between the countries. The case also contributes to the understanding of modernization and knowledge not simply as pillars of an empire of knowledge, but as mechanisms that provoked conflicts and failure and finally destabilized epistemological power relations. In his critical assessment of the project, Schulze in his paper drew on a contemporary American anthropologist writing in the 1960s. This prompted Axel Jansen to remark that along with the different variations of colonialism the twentieth century also witnessed the rise of fields that provided new venues for critiques. Ironically, imperial powers exported not just expertise, but also critics of imperial knowledge formations.

In his keynote address, Andrew Zimmerman picked up on and developed a theme raised in many papers presented at the conference,
namely the role of the subaltern in creating knowledge as a basis for political power. Turning the received Western canon on its head, Zimmerman connected dots in the nineteenth century to suggest a tradition of colonial knowledge that inspired rural insurgency, from the Haitian revolution to African American efforts to abolish slavery in the United States that reflected processes of self-emancipation central to struggles against involuntary servitude. Such knowledge, Zimmerman suggested, even informed political and social theories of the best-known European intellectuals, including Hegel, Marx, and Weber, in their efforts to conceptualize theories that would capture such developments.

The second day of discussions began with the debate about diseases and race in the British Empire. Suman Seth’s paper explored theories of disease to reveal how the British understood empire and how the history of these empires can illuminate the idea of the locatedness of medical discourse about specific places. Seth understands discourse and arguments as part of scientific practices, as evidence for theories of why people get sick. This idea is key to understanding that the rational medicine emerging at the end of the eighteenth century was as much a product of the colonies as it was a product of hospitals and schools in Europe. Theories of disease and their relationships to places offer illuminating sources for understanding how the British conceived of their empire and how they interpreted the distinction between the diseases of temperate and tropical climes. The analysis of that distinction would not be complete without considering race and its relationship with science. In discourses of race and disease of warm climates, the colonizers minimized smaller intra-regional differences and emphasized inter-regional differences. Seth argues that the “emergence of modern conceptions of race, and the emergence of a category of tropical diseases were inter-twined phenomena, to be explained by a history of medicine, race, slavery, and empire.”

Race is also the topic of Ruth Rogaski’s work on Manchuria. The paper she presented in our workshop is part of a bigger project to explain how the idea of Manchuria was built. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Japanese government (mainly, but the Chinese, too) conducted extensive research and experiments in Manchuria in pursuit of a better understanding of bubonic plague. One of the Japanese empire’s objectives was to create “Chinese” as a racial category. The Japanese Unit 731 — an organization of the Japanese Imperial Army that developed and deployed bacteriological weapons
in Manchuria and in the Pacific region during the 1930s and 1940s — created knowledge about the disease by means of an interdisciplinary, biomedical, holistic approach, which gave tropical medicine a “cross-field character” unique among the medical sciences. “This approach emphasized seeing all organisms from man to microbe existing in a complex “web of life,” enabling the implementation of “progressive” colonial policies focused on ameliorating environmental conditions and implementation of “progressive” colonial policies focused on ameliorating environmental conditions rather than on “castigating native populations for unique ‘racialized’ shortcomings.” However innovative this approach may have been, it did not prevent the members of Unit 731 from committing atrocities in Manchuria.

Another interesting experimental medical approach was the one adopted by the British scientist Alexander Haddow in Uganda in the 1940s. The approach considered “non-human components of experimental systems in virus research and how those systems linked humans, non-human primates, and mosquitos in an ecological understanding” of Uganda. Haddow emphasized the manipulation of living parts in order to test hypotheses about the transmission of yellow fever and other viruses. Moreover, he highlighted the necessity of remaking the environment at his site of investigation in Uganda, so yellow fever could be made visible. He and his research team thus transformed a natural place into an experimental space by “importing non-native species, manufacturing artificial dwellings, and manipulating the behavior of human residents.” This place, in turn, shaped his research findings. Julia Cummiskey showed that Haddow’s research was fundamentally a colonial project, “in which the organizing, disciplining and reconfiguration of people, their dwelling places, mosquitos, and monkeys” were designed to transform them into experimental spaces and to colonize Uganda.

The inter-imperial context of disease was also discussed in Theresa Ventura’s paper on rice enrichment in the Philippines. Beriberi, a severe Vitamin B1 (thiamine) deficiency, was the target of a group of American researchers in the Philippines in the mid-1940s. This living laboratory, whose main objective was to investigate the cause and etiology of beriberi, was composed of individuals in prisons, insane asylums, leper colonies, plantations, and military barracks. In her paper, Ventura described racism as embedded in the technology of dietary practices and supplements as Americans disregarded an indigenous understanding of infant mortality and malnourishment.
Using the example of the Philippines, Ventura showed how beriberi was understood as a modern disease produced by colonial trade and by the replication of colonial institutions. She also pointed out how “citizen-consumers, millers, and Philippine government leaders, along with the United Nations, remained deeply skeptical of the presence of pharmaceutical corporations in the daily dietary.” The independence of those companies as well as food sovereignty were crucial in this case, even if it meant slower progress on beriberi research in areas where the disease was still endemic.

The workshop’s last paper, by Prakash Kumar, traced the rise of development in India as revealed in the realms of colonial discourses. Kumar suggested that post-independence development should be viewed in its own right so as to correct the prevalent interpretation of Indian development as a successful cold war project inspired from the outside. One of the main contributions of Kumar’s research consists in establishing a clear genealogy of development in colonial India and in the period of transition to India’s sovereignty. Conceiving of nation-building as a fundamentally exclusionary project, Kumar suggested that the Indian case touches on different kinds of governmentality in addition to issues of empire. In the early decades of the twentieth century, colonial administrations sought to optimize the “governmentalization of the state.” The nineteenth century’s “civilizing mission” became insufficient for legitimizing the state’s claims, and the “colonial state claimed for itself the right to representing ‘Indian’ interests, implying that serving ‘Indian’ interests was inseparable from the functions of a ‘colonial’ state.” For Kumar, the Indian case reveals how nations were trying to discipline identities, and how identities, in turn, were politicized.

The “Empires of Knowledge” workshop emphasized how new ideas came to the fore because of colonization and decolonization processes throughout the world. What is special about science and empire in the twentieth century is that actors moved from the idea that places make us sick to the idea that people make us sick. The conclusion to this logic is obvious: people have to be controlled and disciplined, a fundamental strategy behind many projects discussed in the conference papers. Despite advances in recent scholarship about science, technology, and empire, researchers continue to face challenges such as acknowledging the role of the colonial state. Local administrations not only conspired with imperial powers to advance the development of research, but they also mediated the relationship between
localities and researchers through intermediaries or “gate-keepers.”

We also must recognize the importance of the colonial environment for the development of research. Actors were engaging in multiple contact zones characterized by polycentric asymmetries of power that need to be critically analyzed and emphasized. In addition, we should investigate how empires used demonstration techniques to convince local populations of the power and effectiveness of scientific practices. Resistance to development projects from the bottom was frequently tackled by making equipment and technologies available to groups of locals, who, “by example,” would convince their neighbors of the miracles of modern, Western science and technologies. Lastly, we continue to underestimate the relevance of silences. All too often, indigenous populations as the targets of developmental and experimental activities have no voice as they have left few or no traces which we could investigate today. What do we know about indigenous health practices and of their systems of knowledge and its vertical and horizontal transfer and circulation?

The workshop’s debates and discussions provided a starting point for an original research agenda that aims to stimulate new ideas, insights and innovative work on the relationship between imperialism and internationalism.

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