

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM: GLOBAL HISTORY OF EMPIRES

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The articles collected in this symposium are a selection of some papers initially presented in the workshop “Governing the Lives of Others: Theories and Practices” hosted by the PhD programme in Global History of Empires (University of Turin) in September 2023. The idea for this conference first came to us while we were both doing fieldwork abroad in Argentina and Japan. The challenges we faced in organising it, while separated by a 12-hour lag, reflected, in a nutshell, some of the issues scholars are delving into since the revival of imperial and global history a few decades ago. How was it possible to bracket into a single category the constellation of imperial entities which emerged, competed and faded on a global scale from the 16th century onwards? What was a common trait which might hold together incredibly diverse historical experiences? Finally, we decided to focus on the practices and discourses that allowed empires to aspire and succeed in governing either directly or indirectly over other people. Such a broad trans-imperial theme allowed us to attract excellent papers and have thought-provoking conversations during the two days in Turin.

The imperial and global turn are two well-established and continually evolving academic developments. These approaches have revitalised curricula in many history departments worldwide, eliciting both positive and negative reactions and resonating even outside the academic world (Sachsenmaier 2012, Haneda 2018). Reviewing the vast literature produced in the past years exceeds the scope of this introduction. However, the collected papers reflected some recent trends in imperial histories. For instance, studying how historical actors experienced and thought about

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the imperial situation(s) in which they were living is now a central concern for many strands of literature (Gerasimov *et al.* 2009). The focus on individual lives and interlopers permitted the challenge of established political categories (Antunes and Polónia 2016) and a reconsideration of traditional spatial ones (Mariano and Morelli 2020; Guyot-Réchart and Leake 2023). Gender and environmental histories affected the study of empires, disclosing both the most intimate and contextual side of imperial experiences. Imperialism and colonialism penetrate the most hidden aspects of people's lives, constructing a “carnal knowledge” of their subjects (Stoler 2002). On the other hand, empires are at the centre of critical narratives of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene (Moore 2017), as they were critical actors in facilitating the socio-economic processes sustaining modern capitalist growth and the increasing pace of natural resource exploitation. Finally, the production of imperial knowledge has attracted much scholarly attention in recent years (Boshier 2022). The increasing need for better information and governing techniques led to the progressive emergence of new institutions, forms of sociability and cultural artefacts that travelled across the porous imperial boundaries (Bonea 2016; Duarte da Silva *et al.* 2023). Botany is an exemplary case of a developing “science” around which pan-European networks of intellectuals exchanged ideas and useful knowledge, which were later co-opted by the attempts to reform and improve imperial governance (Drayton 2000). Similarly, during the 18th century political economy became a central science for the economic government of empires, thanks to the European context of imperial emulative competition (Reinert 2011).

These developments within academia also re-ignited debates about the necessity to “provincialize” and “decolonise” global and imperial histories (Chakrabarty 2000). On one hand, some have sought to rewrite global and transnational narratives to include the experiences of those neglected by Western-centric historiography (Amin 2011). For instance, new histories were written, focusing on interactions between non-Western actors and recasting attention to the study of transnational and trans-imperial solidarities (Stolte and Lewis 2022). On the other hand, others have questioned the universality of Western academic categories in studying non-Western people and their imperial formations (Bose 2009; Hedinger and Heé 2018; Mizutani 2019). Central to their arguments is the criticism of the idea that theoretical frameworks to study empires can be made using only Western imperial formations, while the rest of the world is reduced to case studies upon which scholars use theoretical and methodological tools developed elsewhere.

The papers in this symposium echo these broader debates, as they show the intersection of all imperial complex dynamics with the act of governing

the other. Building on an environmental history approach, Malecha Teixeira examines the impacts of Portuguese colonial strategies on the natural environments they encountered in the early phase of overseas expansion (15th and 16th centuries). The author identifies two strategies (colonies of circulation and colonies of production), whose unintended consequences led to opposite impacts: colonies of circulation led to a contraction of agricultural land and an increase in wildlife, while colonies of production caused extensive ecological disruption, including deforestation and soil degradation. This dual-model framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the environmental consequences of Portuguese colonial strategies and their long-term ecological impacts, highlighting how the impossibility or disinterest to “govern” nature during the early phase of European expansion profoundly impacted the natural world.

The Portuguese empire is the imperial context also in the work of Moura Ferreira. However, his paper reveals that at the end of the 18th century, the economic government of nature was a crucial preoccupation of Bernardo Peres da Silva, reformer and administrator in Portuguese Goa. His urgency in increasing Goan agricultural output is narrated through his advocacy for introducing a crop coming from the other side of the world: the potato. This way, the circulation of agricultural knowledge is linked to the new political and economic ideas on economic development and political representation within empires that circulated during the Age of Revolutions, as far as the Indian subcontinent. This case also shows the porous boundaries between colonisers and colonised: Peres da Silva was a Goan-born Portuguese administrator belonging to the local Creole elites. If we consider him from a European point of view, he is a ‘colonised’, as he had to obey metropolitan orders, sometimes going against what he believed was best for his *patria*, Goa. If we consider his positionality in the colonial context, he was a ‘coloniser’, as Goan society was heavily segmented according to racial and ethnic lines, and the Native non-Creole population stood on an unequal foot compared to the Creole elite.

Amal Shahid illustrates the complex dynamics of the Swiss missionaries’ colonial project in India. Focusing on the Basel Mission’s industrial endeavours in Malabar and South Canara (South India), the paper demonstrates the contradictions arising from different perceptions of this colonial situation: missionaries viewed their industrial efforts as philanthropic, expecting indigenous workers to show gratitude and conform to the mission’s religious practices, including regular attendance at congregational prayers. However, workers primarily saw their employment as livelihood, leading to social turmoil during famines.

Finally, Anna Nasser examines the critical role of the Association des Femmes de l’Union Française (AFUF) in the imperial governance and

social policy of French West Africa during the mid-20th century. The AFUF sought to address the perceived 'backwardness' of local women by focusing on their education as a means to stabilise and civilise colonial society. This case again highlights the contradictory results of the imperial situation. While promoting (European) social education and professional training, the association created a tension between promoting women's emancipation and maintaining imperial control. While by the mid-1950s, the AFUF's influence waned due to a restructuration of French imperial policy, it influenced local society as the new women's roles were both instrumentalised for colonial governance and used to challenge and redefine their societal positions within the constraints of the imperial system.

While distinct in their specific contexts and focal points, the four papers collectively describe the intricate dynamics of colonial governance, reform, and the interplay between indigenous agency and colonial power. These studies reveal significant commonalities in exploring economic, social, and environmental transformations under colonial rule. A central theme across these papers is the implementation of reformist ideologies and the consequent restructuring of indigenous practices to align with colonial objectives. Resistance and adaptation by indigenous populations emerge as critical factors. The Basel Mission faced resistance from local weavers reluctant to abandon traditional methods, and the AFUF encountered indigenous women perceiving its efforts as paternalistic. Peres da Silva's reforms faced opposition from local elites and colonial authorities, wary of liberal ideas disrupting the status quo. Even if Teixeira's work is not concerned with reform, the description of the different environmental consequences of Portuguese colonisation signals a desire to transform social reality according to economic or political goals. Socio-economic transformation was an unintended outcome in the early phase of European expansion, while later, it was the goal of reformist zeal. Despite overarching colonial control, extra-European nature and indigenous individuals negotiated, adapted, and resisted reform efforts, highlighting the complexities and limitations of colonial power.

In summary, the four papers collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of colonial governance, reform, and the interplay between indigenous agency and colonial power. Through a detailed examination of economic, social, and environmental transformations, these studies reveal common themes of resistance, adaptation, and the enduring impact of colonial ideologies and practices on indigenous societies. The reformist agendas, gender dynamics, educational initiatives, and environmental consequences highlighted in these papers provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities and legacies of colonial rule across different contexts and periods.

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