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Conference Report:

Afterlives of Empire: How Imperial Legacies Shaped European Integration

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Afterlives of Empire: How Imperial Legacies Shaped European Integration. Conference organized by the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the German Historical Institute London, held at the GHIL on 12–14 June 2024. Conveners: Alexander Nützenadel and Heike Wieters (HU Berlin).

The European integration processes in the second half of the twentieth century coincided with the dissolution of global empires. These developments were co-dependent, as an increasing body of literature shows.¹ In particular, this historiography underlines the fact that the trajectory of integration cannot merely be understood as ever-closer cooperation between formerly isolated nation states. Transnational networks and identities rooted in imperial legacies strongly shaped the character of the European institutions and their policies.

The conference sought to amplify, substantiate, and contextualize these emerging research findings, uniting scholars of various regional specializations. As Alexander Nützenadel emphasized in his opening remarks, the focus on imperial legacies combines five new historical perspectives on the history of European integration. First, historians should investigate structural, long-term path dependencies from (de)colonization to integration. Second, they should consider overlapping territorial arrangements and forms of integration based on imperial traditions, which interacted with the integration model on the European continent and often came into conflict with it. Third, studying imperial legacies allows for new research on national strategies in the European context to compensate for the loss of empires; and this research can refer, fourth, to narratives and self-perceptions within post-imperial metropolises, which shaped specific national attitudes towards the European Community. In this vein, fifth, new research in integration history seeks to discuss whether the EU itself is functionally equivalent to an empire – one based on soft power, multiple identities, and decentralized political structures.

¹ e.g. Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London, 2015); Giuliano Garavini, *After Empires: European Integration, Decolonization, and the Challenge from the Global South 1957–1986*, trans. Richard R. Nybakken (Oxford, 2012); Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford, 2006).

Florian Wagner (University of Erfurt) opened the first panel on persisting structures with a presentation on the legacies of transimperial corporatism. He argued that the liberal concept of functional governance—that is, the organization of international cooperation based on specific functions and needs rather than borders and ideologies—originated in the practices of colonial rule. In particular, the International Colonial Institute, founded in 1894, served as a transimperial network for businesses and administrations, and as a testing ground for corporatist governance under fascism. After the EEC became a member in 1958, some African leaders supported the institute's utility, but many also emphasized its role in circumventing democratic rule in the newly independent states. Wagner thus emphasized the continuity of the institute's work through the various disruptions from the nineteenth to the late twentieth century, despite a superficial rebranding in 1946.

In the second paper, Borut Klabjan (University of Ljubljana) showed how collective memories of the Habsburg Empire were reactivated in Cold War Europe during the 1950s and 1960s and became instrumental to regional integration in the transnational Alps-Adriatic region. This process facilitated formalized regional cooperation during the 1970s, as well as the conceptualization of *Mittleuropa* (Central Europe) as a common cultural area during the 1980s. In the 1990s, awakening nationalist movements utilized the Habsburg ideal to emancipate themselves from previous entanglements with the Yugoslav state, which had been founded amidst the interwar turmoil that followed the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire. While the Habsburg heritage did not necessarily mean the same thing in each individual state, the example underlines the fact that empires and nation states are not fixed categories, but have specific pre- and afterlives that can be reactivated if needed.

Tonio Schwertner (HU Berlin) closed the panel with a presentation on the role of imperial legacies within business cycles, referring to the example of the rubber industry. When rubber became a key material for everyday economic life, European empires organized its production in their equatorial colonies. As these regions gained independence after the Second World War, companies such as Pirelli feared losing access to vital areas of cultivation. Only cooperation at the European

level, the companies argued in a coordinated manner, could guarantee sufficient supplies of raw materials for stable production and offer protection against emerging American competition. Thus support for the European integration of the rubber industry transcended the borders of the continent and was related to the former imperial era. The presentations collectively showcased how long-term structures survived from the colonial to the integration period and were even reactivated during times of rupture. These structures were not only institutional but also conceptual and economic in nature, and included state, regional, and socio-economic actors.

Following this discussion, Sara Lorenzini (University of Trento) closed the first conference day with a keynote lecture on breaks and continuities in Europe's 'civilizing missions' in Africa. Development as a key policy concept enjoyed a long trajectory from the imperial world to the 1960s. This legacy continued in the form of environmentalism from the Stockholm Conference of June 1972 onwards. For politicians and environmentalists such as Sicco Mansholt and Barbara Ward, the European Community had become the torchbearer of a civilizing moment, representing a more ethical, social, and political vision of the economy against ecological degradation. In their view, the EC was an engine for change and the common market a model for Africa. This idea was even shared by US diplomats like George Kennan. Representatives of the so-called Third World, however, did not accept responsibility for global pollution by adapting to European models of development. They engaged with the industrial North mostly as an act of goodwill. Moreover, as the 'polluter pays' principle became more dominant, the role of a 'civilizing mission' became less salient. Only in the 1980s did the Brundtland report mark a shift, introducing the concept of sustainable growth on a global scale. As the EU became a global partner for sustainable development, 'civilized growth' rhetoric resurfaced and led to a partial comeback of older habits.

Frank Gerits (Utrecht University) opened the second panel on conflicting integrations. He emphasized the agency of African leaders who positioned their countries within a wide and contingent spectrum of European-African relationships, and he argued that EEC association projects with African nations were more diverse than the 'Eurafrica' model might suggest. This variety broadly evolved in

three phases: during the 1950s, 'Eurafrican' concepts were still dominant, but alternative views on the rising agency of (post-)colonial Africa started to become influential. In the 1960s, European integration served as an (often negative) example for pan-African ideas and initiatives for regional cooperation. Finally, during the 1980s, pleas for an African single market were bolstered by concessions from economic giants like the EC. In this context, African leaders repeatedly presented their projects to Brussels officials without constituting a uniform voice. Gerits' research showed that the consideration of imperial legacies is relevant not only for the history of integration on the European continent, but also for understanding various African developments.

Algeria offers a unique example in this regard. In her presentation, Megan Brown (Swarthmore College) analysed its special status as an integral part of the colonial metropole, which French authorities emphasized during the original EEC negotiations. The Treaty of Rome specifically exempted Algeria, as France feared other European partners would have an increasing influence on its colony. But even after Algeria's independence in 1962, the French government tried to preserve its particular affiliation to its former *département*. In 1976, when the EEC's relationships with various Maghreb countries were harmonized, France still insisted on extensive cooperation with Algeria, including labour migration.

In the third presentation, Sven van Mourik (formerly New York University) delved into another aspect of the transformation of European-African relationships. As the public debt of African nations skyrocketed during the 1970s, the 'unconditional aid' principle of the Lomé Agreements came to an end. Instead, the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF now involved harmful budget cuts with ramifications for social and economic development. In this context, van Mourik argued, the EC's role was paradoxical: while insisting that African countries repay their debt, thus supporting the IMF and the World Bank in their efforts, the Community increased spending on development aid to mitigate the effect of adjustment programmes. By the 1990s, therefore, the Eurafrican networks were included in the global Washington consensus and, at the same time, maintained a special relationship via the dynamics of development aid. The panellists

thus highlighted overlapping territorialities and global orders that were shaped by (post-)imperial entanglements.

The third panel compared strategies of compensation after the loss of an empire. First, Almuth Ebke (University of Mannheim) examined the conceptual complexities of imperial and European identities during the reforms of British nationality law in the 1970s and early 1980s, interpreting the history of legal rules as an example of 'internal decolonization'. After the 1948 British Nationality Act, most (post-)colonial migrants to Britain were actually 'Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies' or possessed the status of a 'Commonwealth Citizen'. The restrictive regulations of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, however, introduced a contradiction between citizenship and immigration rights. The UK's accession to the European Community and associated mutual migration rights further complicated the picture. Eventually, the Conservative government elected in 1979 adopted a three-tier concept of nationality based on the 'closeness' of the respective country to the United Kingdom, favouring citizens from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand over those of all other former colonies. More than being a legal issue, the reform debates thus led to a reconfiguration of mental maps vis-à-vis the former empire, the British nation state, and the emerging European space.

In the second paper, Philipp Müller (Hamburg Institute for Social Research) explored the changing roles of agents from the public and private sectors in decolonization processes, using the example of Mozambique. The Portuguese colony underwent substantial industrialization programmes while under direct imperial rule. During the 1960s, the colonial administration used the support of private international companies to boost the legitimacy of such investments. This transnational social field of actors remained intact even after official independence in 1975 and Mozambique's turn to socialism; however, their roles changed. The country's planning commission now assumed a leading position, while European companies served as quasi-delegates of EC states for on-the-ground cooperation. The scope of entrepreneurial action was re-emphasized following the Mozambican Civil War, the 'neoliberal turn', and Mozambique's inclusion in global markets. Industrial endeavours in the decolonization process,

Müller thus showed, were shaped by path dependencies as well as changes in economic thinking and global political hierarchies.

The third panellist, Elizabeth Buettner (University of Amsterdam), returned to the themes of identity and belonging by examining the perceptions of multiculturalism in European societies. As she argued, the many histories of migration from outside and within Europe have largely been written separately: intra-European migration due to fascist persecution, labour migration from Southern and Eastern Europe and North Africa during the *trente glorieuses*, and post-colonial migration to the former metropolises are still understood as independent phenomena. In fact, they interacted, dynamically changing perceptions of belonging and identity and leading to changes in concepts of Whiteness, Europeanness, and cultural closeness. This facilitated the inclusion or exclusion of different migrant groups at different points in time. Moreover, these processes unfolded in the context of increasing cross-border integration of societies and economies, so that national migration histories were entangled with those of other European countries. The examples in these talks all demonstrated that the legacies of colonial rule were highly present not only in former colonies, but also in Europe. Significantly, the decolonization processes shaped and reshaped mental maps and geographical configurations of, for example, economic relationships, migration, and identity.

While the first three panels dealt with persistent legacies of empire during integration, the two presentations of the fourth panel aimed to study how new narratives, policies, and practices shaped by imperial pasts emerged during European integration processes. Restitution claims for ethnographic objects collected in colonial times, Susan Legêne (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) argued, are a case in point here. In particular, the ratification (or otherwise) by Western European UN members of the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property led to intra-state and intra-European discussions on how to deal with demands to restore spoliated objects. From the outside, 'Western Europe' was increasingly perceived as a region with a shared history and responsibility towards the cultures of former empires. This view was rejected by French, British, Dutch, and other officials. Nevertheless, a common position on restitution

claims from the UN or third states was negotiated within the European Council and communicated via its presidency. In other words, European cooperation took place even though officials disregarded the European dimension as an issue of debate.

Legêne's co-panellist Robin de Bruin (University of Amsterdam) offered yet another perspective on European post-war policies through the lens of reconfigured imperial self-perceptions. Since the nineteenth century, de Bruin showed, decision-makers in the Netherlands had assumed a distinctive position in the global imperial order by favouring free trade policies between empires and by inviting foreign investments in its Indonesian territories, where it believed it was pursuing a form of 'ethical colonialism'. This exceptionalist idea not only inspired the colonial aspects of the interwar 'pan-Europe' concept propagated by thinkers such as Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, but it also served as a blueprint for Dutch support of free trade between EEC countries and their former colonies during the negotiations on the 1963 and 1969 Yaoundé Treaties, which clashed with more protectionist ideas put forward by French officials. The Dutch example thus underlines how self-perceptions and national roles within the global imperial order were reactivated in the European Community setting, and shows that ideas of decolonization and European integration were more differentiated than the 'Eurafrica' concept suggests.

De Bruin's paper already hinted at the intersection of colonial and post-colonial political practices, and the last panel focused on this junction more closely, looking at economic legacies. The first speaker, Véronique Dimier (Université libre de Bruxelles), investigated the continuation of European colonial entrepreneurship in the context of African post-independence development efforts. To undertake big and often useless infrastructure or industrialization projects, African leaders relied on the support of European capital and expertise. Because of this dependence, Dimier argued, structures of indirect rule continued to exist well into the post-colonial period. In particular, French and Belgian companies utilized prevailing experiences and networks in their respective post-imperial spheres to win calls for tender via bribes, or because projects were technically designed in their favour. The European Development Fund, led by Jacques Ferrandi (1962–75), a former colonial official, helped to set up this neo-patrimonial system,

urging European companies to adapt to African cultures and contexts. This created tensions with competitors from other EEC countries who demanded equal access. However, rather than being abolished, the patrimonial system was opened to and adopted by other European companies.

In the last paper of the conference, Felix Römer (HU Berlin) presented his research on the epistemic practices and statistical legacies of knowledge creation for social policy after 1945. In the post-war decades, international organizations such as the UN, the OECD, and the European Communities endorsed the expansion and harmonization of social indicators on a global scale. However, these initiatives were often met with national scepticism as they would have created a global equivalent space that allowed for intercontinental comparisons and thus fuelled demand for social development aid. As the British example shows, national officials initially wanted to prevent the intrusion of international organizations into global statistical knowledge creation, as harmonized indicators would have highlighted the dismal results of colonial rule for the local population compared to the industrial North. Only by the 1980s and 1990s did advances in harmonization trump the post-imperial and neoliberal aversion to comparative discussions about inequality and standards of living. Overall, the economic perspective thus underlined how imperial legacies were reshuffled in the context of intra-European cooperation, thereby shaping political practices vis-à-vis the post-independence world.

In a final discussion, the participants reviewed the main conference outcomes. Fundamentally, it was agreed that many imperial legacies continued despite formal decolonization. However, the presentations showed that these persistent structures were not straightforward forms of modern imperialism. Instead, they were characterized by various competing projects, overlapping concepts, and ambiguous ideas. European integration, including its various enlargement rounds, created a platform for the negotiation of such legacies and was itself shaped by persistent imperial structures.

Beyond these findings, the conference also highlighted the need for further research. First, it was pointed out that a more precise definition of 'empire' is needed to further substantiate the discussion. As it

stands, the term encompasses too many processes, concepts, and associations, complicating a clear distinction between imperial legacies and other developments. The same is true of the term 'integration' and its different phenomena—even more so if the EU itself is to be understood as functionally equivalent to an empire. Second, a history of European integration through the lens of imperial legacies should consider that the countries that joined in different rounds of enlargement each brought new historical experiences to bear on the process. For instance, while most of the conference papers focused on the legacies of Western European overseas empires, a stronger emphasis on the Continental European empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would have led to different results. Finally, the contributions showed that considering empire and integration together leads to different chronologies to those found in the standard historiographies of each topic. In that sense, imperial history did not fade away in the post-war decades, and the prehistory of the European Union did not only start in 1945 or with the Treaties of Rome. A planned book project based on this conference will pick up these lines of thought.

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