Roundtable "Colonialism and the Creation of Europe"

Organizers: Maria Paula Diogo, Tiago Saraiva
Chairperson: Donna Mehos

Position Paper

This roundtable wants to address the role of colonial technical development in the shaping of Europe.

Colonial and post-colonial issues are critical to our understanding of Europe. One cannot speak about the history of Europe while ignoring its colonial past. Both the acquisition and loss of colonies have influenced not only European social and political relations but also the changing definition of "Europe." Similarly, scholars have recognized that many colonisers only discovered and defined their own European identity in the colonial context (Hall, 1994). It is also impossible to understand the present situation of Europe in the global arena without considering the history of its formation as a world actor during the colonial period.

The new economic trends of the nineteenth century, in particular the need for new markets and new sources of raw materials, led entrepreneurs to overseas territories in Africa, South America, and Asia. Similarly, the geopolitical agreements of the Berlin Conference led to new perceptions of the relationship between European and non-European spaces. Science and Technology, as historiography has already acknowledged (Headrick, 1981; Macleod, 2000; Adas, 1989), played a crucial role in this process of economic overseas expansion. After decolonization, new geopolitical relationships emerged among European nations including new international organizations, a subject that deserved less attention by historians of Technology.

Although technology has been commonly identified as a critical component in the rise of both empire and post-colonial development projects, much less well-investigated is the influence *on Europe* of technological developments related to the tropical world. In this roundtable we would like to embrace a methodological approach that stresses the European point of view. Although we are fully aware of the importance of other standpoints, namely

those of the colonized (subaltern studies), we would like this debate to focus on the way European nations build their own identity and defined their space in the international scene by using an imperial power strongly technologically based. Maybe the now prevailing trend in postcolonial studies, mostly driven by anthropologists, that stress the active role of the colonized in forging hybrid forms of knowledge and technology, and the reasonable shift of locus of attention from centre to peripheries, from North to South, explains much of our present difficulties in putting the colonial experience at the heart of the Tensions of Europe intellectual agenda. It would seem as if the most recent postcolonial studies approaches, and their visions from below, would lessen the explanatory relevance of colonialism for understanding Europe. How otherwise would we justify the play down of the role of empires in contemporary European history when, for example, port cities like Amsterdam, Hamburg or Liverpool, that owed much to the legacies of overseas trade and finance, loomed so prominently in Europe's economy and urban geography in 1900 (Arnold, 2005)?

But the truth is that recentring our attention in colonial history unveils mostly a history of tensions among European States (Sassen, 2006), disclosing an intricate network of interests which involves both the most powerful countries and the peripheral ones. Great Britain and France extended their leadership by using their colonial territories; Germany redesigned its national agenda by demanding to be part of the "division of the world"; Spain envisaged its territories in Northern Africa as critical to its prestige; smaller countries such as Portugal, Belgium or the Netherlands claimed their space in the European arena by deriving power from their empires. It is indeed a history of nation states, fiercely defending their own interest *vis-à-vis* the non-European world, actively building each one's sphere of influence. After all, historians of nationalism (Gellner, 1983) had long ago established tight relations between the rising of national ideologies and colonial expansion. Already in 1938 Hobson characterized the new imperialism by the ascendance of multiple imperialisms all in the name of national aggrandizement and commercial gain (Hobson, 1938). Looking at the present, one may wonder if the inability of the European Community to build a common policy concerning foreign affairs isn't the natural outcome of the old imperial rule.

Thus, in an intellectual agenda that would be exclusively concerned with the hidden historical integration of Europe through technology, the tools of empire should be put aside for its obvious role in dividing more than uniting Europe. One could of course stress how European empires and their global expansion demanded a sort of interimperial coordination present in such institutions as the International Telegraph Union or the International Meteorological Organization. But we would be missing the obvious not to perceive in the lay down of submarine cables the material expression of national imperial policies (Smith & Wise, 1989). The conversion of the Eiffel Tower into a monumental antenna in the beginning of the twentieth century broadcasting time signal and aligning clock hands across Europe should be seen firstly in the context of British and French imperial rivalries (Galison, 2003). The development of wireless transmission by Henri Poincaré at the head of the Bureau of Longitudes, who pushed to make the Eiffel Tower into the greatest time synchronizer in the world, was justified by the monopoly of the global telegraph cables network by English companies that were able to cut all communications between Paris and its colonies. Already in 1907 the army was able to celebrate its success in using radio when the French forces fighting Moroccan rebels were able to communicate with their commanders in France. This is a significant example of how a technology developed for colonial rule contributed to the independence of one empire, the French, *vis à vis* another European empire, the British. It also suggests how a technology first conceived for separating empires could contribute for a hidden European integration through time synchronization, thus revealing the tensions that form the ground of our common intellectual agenda.

Colonial technology also played another double folded role: on the one hand it allowed, through the construction of networks of infrastructures (railways, harbours, telegraphs, sanitation) in the colonies to "domesticate" human and non-human subjects, in a double process of "Europeanizing" the world and "globalizing" Europe. This was no automatic process, but a conflicting one often showing the difficulties of transferring and/or adapting European technologies in tropical latitudes and the distance between the grandiloquent colonial rhetoric and its translation in the landscape (the scarcity of resources so often invoked by the colonial elites). Who may forget the progressive lost of

ties with the imperial metropolis as Marlow goes upriver in search for Kurz in Conrad's Heart of Darkness?

On the other hand, colonial territories were used as experimental fields for metropolitan engineers (and as field laboratories for European scientists): knowledge and professional and/or political status was acquired by European technical experts from their involvement in colonial technology and science. Moreover colonial territories were a very dynamic job market that supported the circulation of technologies, experts, and expertise both between Europe and colonies and between colonial powers. A significant number of scientific and technological institutions were created to support this new worldwide science and technology, the paradigm being the Imperial College in London; the administration itself was redesigned in order to accommodate the "colonial corps" of engineers and physicians.

Many engineers were only able to find a job through their enrolment in colonial endeavours. And if one follows the trajectories of many of these engineers one soon finds out that such an experience had great consequences for their subsequent activity in Europe. A good example of what we're saying is the case of the engineer Ezequiel de Campos who after his African experience in the island of São Tomé designed an entire project for the internal colonization of Portugal. Actually much of his project would serve as the first basis for the building of dams and irrigation works during the Portuguese fascist regime of Salazar, many of them designed by engineers in constant circulation between Portugal and Angola and Mozambique. For all of them it was hard to distinguish between colonizing Africa and colonizing Portugal.

It is good to notice that the close relations between European fascism and the colonial experience are a pertinent subject al least since Hannah Harendt's famous work on the origins of totalitarianism. Such connections have now become obvious for the Nazi ambitions toward Eastern and South-eastern Europe. It is now commonplace to perceive the Lebensraum ideology as the German answer to the vastness of the British Empire and its worldwide control of raw materials and food production (Tooze, 2006). More than that, current research on Nazism, science and technology has shown how relevant it is to perceive Ostpolitik as colonial rule (Heim, 2002). As Hitler himself declared to collaborators in 1941, Ukraine would be transformed into the barn of the Reich,

receiving cereals in change for handkerchiefs, glass beads and all other objects fancied by "colonized people". More dramatically, the term concentration camp invented by the Spanish in 1896 in Cuba, also entered the German language and politics by way of Germany experience in Western Africa when in 1904 the Herero people was condemned to extermination by the General Adolf Lebrecht von Trotha (Lindqvist, 2005).

As already stated, the colony was thus a privileged trial field for technologies that would later be brought into the European arena. Air-bombing which plays such a prominent role in the darkest pages of European twentieth century history is another striking example. The first bomb launched from an aeroplane exploded in an oasis near Tripoli in 1911 in an Italian attack (Lindqvist, 2002). If it is difficult for Europeans to forget the terrible vision by Picasso of the bombing of Guernica in 1937, not many remember the air-bombing of the Moroccan village of Xauen twelve years earlier to defend Spanish colonial interests.

What we want to underline is that much of European contemporary history passes trough the colonial world, even if it's not always pleasant to acknowledge it. This is more obvious for countries with colonial empires like Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Portugal or Spain. This makes for a huge portion of Europe and it should be enough to make the subject of colonial technology a central one to the Tensions of Europe agenda. Nevertheless, we would also like to suggest that maybe colonial approaches can also be relevant for Eastern Europe countries. And this not only by way of the German connection we already referred to, but also through novel ways of looking to the Soviet empire that overcome the old distinctions between overseas empires and continental annexations.

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