

INTO THE STACKS ARTICLE RELAUNCH: “POWER AND CONNECTION”

## Decentering the American Empire

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It must have been eight years ago when I read Paul Kramer’s article for the first time. Back then, I had just finished my PhD and was developing a new research project thematically located at the intersection of medical, imperial, and global history. One of the particularities of the German academic path when compared to the Anglo-American context is the expectation to embark on a completely different line of inquiry after defending your doctoral dissertation. Postdoctoral researchers venture into an entirely new topic, often take on a new century, and, for good measure, turn to another region of the world. At a time when I was surfacing from a thesis on German post-1945 international history, reading “Power and Connection” was tremendously helpful and instructive in guiding my first steps into the vast terrain of nineteenth-century imperial and colonial history. While its insights into the imperial dimension of U.S. history were fascinating, it was more so its framing of the American case, as a modern empire among others, that led me to the article. Ultimately, this interest evolved into my current project on the policies on epidemics in the nineteenth-century British and American empires. This framing provides the angle for my re-reading of “Power and Connection.” From an imperial historian’s perspective, particularly of British imperial history and comparative empire studies, I explore here some of the links between the broader discipline and Kramer’s essay up to 2011 when it was published and thereafter.

### “Power and Connection” in Context (I): The Renaissance of Imperial History

In the early 2010s, imperial history had been gaining steam for almost two decades. In the 1990s, postcolonial and subaltern studies, as well as the cultural turn, inspired a new understanding of the nature and effects of imperialism, colonialism, and power. Starting within British imperial history, a “new imperial history” prioritized cultural and epistemological questions over economic, geopolitical, or military issues. Innovative lines of inquiry led to the production of a growing body of literature and quickly spilled over to historiography on other empires. Moreover, historians critical of culturalist perspectives equally contributed to an increasingly diverse and rich scholarship on empire. Heated debates among exponents of different approaches, the “imperial history wars,” became another driving force of an “imperial turn” that has not yet lost momentum.<sup>1</sup>

This development was conspicuous at the time, given the discipline’s formerly rather marginalized position in academia across different countries, and even in the United Kingdom itself. A gaining and waning of interest in the imperial dimension of national history characterizes the historiography of many (former) imperial and colonial powers, notwithstanding

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<sup>1</sup>Dane Kennedy, *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire* (London, 2018); Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, NC, 2003). See also Durba Ghosh, “Another Set of Imperial Turns?,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (June 2012): 772–93; Stephen Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (London, 2010); and Andrea Wiegeshoff, “(New) Imperial History,” *Bloomsbury History Theory and Method*, Apr. 28, 2022, [www.bloomsburyhistorytheorymethod.com](http://www.bloomsburyhistorytheorymethod.com) (accessed Apr. 28, 2022).

empire's intriguing and certainly special "periodic tendency to disappear" in the American case (1383). As Kramer notes, these dynamics are telling of how historical research is always also a product of the present. Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's contributions to imperial history in the 1950s are a case in point, especially their influential concept of *informal empire*, which was developed in light of, among other developments, the United States' political and economic dominance after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup>

Despite national specificities, the veritable renaissance of imperial history since the 1990s gathered pace in many countries beyond the United Kingdom, including Germany, Russia, and the USA.<sup>3</sup> This synchronicity might not surprise given the virtually global dynamics sparking it, notably the end of the Cold War, the United States' position as unrivaled great power, and the acceleration of globalization processes. Moreover, in the early 2000s, the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq prompted asynchronous comparisons between the USA and the late-nineteenth-century predecessor to its global role, the British empire.<sup>4</sup> Together with a growing public awareness of empires' legacies, such as global inequalities, racism, or ecological transformations, these developments have catalyzed an upsurge in literature on imperial history that reached a first peak in the early 2010s.<sup>5</sup> In this context, "Power and Connection" both discusses and exemplifies the discipline's new vigor. The essay was a timely call to situate research on U.S. history within a broader historiographical framework and, importantly, to connect this history to dynamics outside the "imperial metropole."

### "Power and Connection" in Context (II): Beyond the Imperial Container

In critiquing methodological nationalism, Kramer urged historians to pay attention to the multiple links transcending national borders. This focus speaks to imperial historians' engagement with global and transnational perspectives well underway in the early 2010s. Proponents of different research strands broadened the analytical gaze not only beyond imperial metropolises, but also beyond "imperial containers."<sup>6</sup> These studies consider imperialism as a "transnational phenomenon" characterized as much by competition and conflict as by collaboration, exchanges, and contacts across overlapping imperial networks.<sup>7</sup>

In this vein, scholars analyze the "embedded" history of empires—the British and the American among others.<sup>8</sup> U.S. history also features in literature on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century "British World" of the (former) British settler colonies, which consisted of

<sup>2</sup>William Roger Louis, "Introduction," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. V: *Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford, UK, 1999), 39.

<sup>3</sup>Kennedy, *Imperial History Wars*, 39–55, 131–47; Sebastian Conrad, *German Colonialism: A Short History* (Cambridge, UK, 2012), 10; Ilya Gerasimov et al., "In Search of a New Imperial History," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2005): 33–56.

<sup>4</sup>A. G. Hopkins, "Comparing British and American Empires," *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007): 395–404.

<sup>5</sup>These review essays provide, alongside "Power and Connection," an impression of the state of research in the early 2010s: Ghosh, "Another Set of Imperial Turns?"; and Tony Ballantyne, "The Changing Shape of the Modern British Empire and its Historiography," *The Historical Journal* 53, no. 2 (June 2010): 429–52.

<sup>6</sup>Alan Lester, "Spatial Concepts and Historical Geographies of British Colonialism," in *Writing Imperial Histories*, ed. Andrew S. Thompson (Manchester, UK, 2013), 128.

<sup>7</sup>Andrew S. Thompson, "Introduction," in *Writing Imperial Histories*, ed. Andrew S. Thompson (Manchester, UK, 2013), 8. See also A. G. Hopkins, "Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History," *Past and Present* 164, no. 1 (1999): 198–243; John M. MacKenzie, ed., *European Empires and the People: Popular Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy* (Manchester, UK, 2011); and Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, UK, 2004).

<sup>8</sup>For instance, see Frank Schumacher, "Embedded Empire: The United States and Colonialism," *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 2 (2016): 202–24; A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); and John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London, 2013).

dense webs of migration, economic exchanges, and racialized ideas of belonging.<sup>9</sup> Last, comparative empire studies focus on concurrent processes within—and connections between—empires, thereby challenging notions of exceptionalism by no means exclusive to U.S. historiography. Showing a healthy disrespect for exceptionalist claims, these studies have started to engage with U.S. history, as have works on the aftermaths of imperialism and colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 2020s, transnational and global perspectives remain important to imperial history. However, justified criticism of tendencies to overstate flows and circulation cautions against downplaying the obstacles and resistance to intra- and transimperial dynamics.<sup>11</sup> Studying such counterforces and unintended consequences of globalization processes helps direct our attention to the non-Western developments shaping imperial and global history. In this respect, foregrounding the imperial dimension of U.S. history serves as a first step to decenter this very history. One way to assess how (trans)imperial networks were shaped, reinforced, and challenged on—and beyond—the edges of empires lies in recalibrating geographical research frameworks to spatial units that do not align with political borders, such as oceans or (supposedly) peripheral places.<sup>12</sup>

In these settings, (U.S.) imperial agents might be found to enter the stage in a weak position, as they often had to yield not only to local actors but also to hostile natural environments. Considering ecological relations, forms of environmental exploitation, and natural constraints on imperial expansion opens up another path to decenter historical narratives. U.S. history plays an important role in such processes, as scholarship on Central and South America shows.<sup>13</sup> Historians have only started to connect imperial history to the history of the Anthropocene and to discuss the imperial dimension of climate change with its globally uneven impacts.<sup>14</sup> These pressing and complex issues further repose and reframe the still pertinent question about power and connection in “an imperial history of the United States in the world (1365).”

<sup>9</sup>For instance, see James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World* (Oxford, UK, 2009); Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ, 2020); Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c. 1850–1914* (Cambridge, UK, 2010); and Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, UK, 2008).

<sup>10</sup>For instance, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010); Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, NM, 2007); Patricia Lorcin, ed., *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Modern Age* (London, 2021); Robert Aldrich and Kirsten McKenzie, eds., *The Routledge History of Western Empires* (London, 2014); Janne Lahti, ed., *German and United States Colonialism in a Connected World: Entangled Empires* (London, 2021); and Kalypto Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, eds., *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies* (London, 2015).

<sup>11</sup>Gareth Curless et al., “Editors’ Introduction: Networks in Imperial History,” *Journal of World History* 26, no. 4 (2015): 726–9.

<sup>12</sup>For instance, see Sujit Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South: A New History of Revolution and Empire* (London, 2021); and David Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram, eds., *Oceanic Histories* (Cambridge, UK, 2017).

<sup>13</sup>Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford, UK, 2017), 17.

<sup>14</sup>For instance, see Emma Gattey, “Global Histories of Empire and Climate in the Anthropocene,” *History Compass* (2021), e12683, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12683>; Sunil Amrith, *Unruly Waters: How Mountain Rivers and Monsoons Have Shaped South Asia’s History* (New York, 2018); and Ross, *Ecology and Power*.