

Empires: Towards a Global History

University of Delhi

3-5 December 2017

This year, members of The Global History Network convened for a conference, “Empires: Towards a Global History.” Held at the University of Delhi, the meeting brought together scholars from around the world for three days from December 3 to December 5, 2017. The conference theme, proposed by Professor Charles Maier of Harvard University, produced a wide-ranging collection of papers that explored ways in which imperial interactions facilitated ideological, cultural, and commercial connectivity among diverse societies. The research presented at the conference illustrated heterogeneous historical manifestations of empires not as discrete containers, but as porous, interactive, and evolving entities operating within an ever-changing global system. The conference was made possible by the generous funding provided by the University of Delhi and the Volkswagen Foundation.

This is the second such meeting to have taken place to date. First convened in March of 2016 at the University of São Paulo, meetings of the Global History Network bring together graduate, postgraduate, and faculty participants from universities and institutes from every continent to discuss global history, and to forge an agenda for future research and teaching in the field. The conference in Delhi expanded upon discussions initiated in 2016 about the role of theory, approaches to teaching, and about the importance of venues such as this conference to the practice of a truly global history, one that generates dialogue among diverse perspectives and that brings a wide variety of intellectual traditions into a common discussion.

Attended by more than 75 people per panel, the event opened with remarks from Professor **Sunil Kumar** of the University of Delhi, Professor **Sven Beckert** of Harvard University, and Professor **Prabhu Mohapatra** of the University of Delhi. Their introductory comments posed broad questions about the temporal, spatial, and political priorities of global history as a subfield of historical study. Professor Kumar noted the overwhelming representation of modern empires among the conference papers, and suggested that theorizations of the historical formation and functioning of empires would benefit from greater consideration of pre- and early-modern empires. Professor Beckert highlighted the revelation of connections and shared experiences across political borders as particular strengths of the field and as important scholarly projects in the contemporary moment. Professor Mohapatra also identified the question of how to manage difference while also putting everyone in some way on the same page as a central problem that global historians grapple with, and proposed that expanding existing categories (such as that of labor history,) and connecting different temporalities are two ways that historians can address that question.

The first two panels of the conference were dedicated to the importance of commodities within and between imperial systems. The first of these panels, chaired by Professor **Sven Beckert**, opened with a presentation by Professor **Jody Benjamin** of the University of California, Riverside on the use of Indian cotton textiles within western African polities to build alliances among African, European, and Arab merchants within and between empires. **Marta Macedo**, postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, considered the transatlantic circulation of cocoa and coffee plantation systems as part of European colonial

repertoires. **Ritesh Jaiswal**, PhD Candidate at the University of Delhi and WIGH Research Fellow turned attention to labor migration within the Indian Ocean world in an examination of the Kangany and Maistry systems of labor recruitment within the context of global and regional upheavals of the 1930s and 40s.

The second panel, chaired by **Professor Karin Hofmeester** of the International Institute of Social History, continued to explore the importance of commodities to imperial projects. Professor **Sharmila Shrivastava** of the University of Delhi assessed global factors affecting production and consumption of coffee in Mysore and Coorg. **Rachel Steely**, PhD Candidate at Harvard University, discussed the ways in which conflicts between empires propelled the expansion of soy from a regional to a global commodity in the late nineteenth century. **Sonal Singh**, PhD Candidate at the University of Delhi, shed light on British use of commodified art, specifically the panorama, to depict India to a mass market in England.

The third panel, chaired by Professor **Farhat Hasan** of the University of Delhi, turned attention to the technologies of empire, and opened with a talk given by Professor **Andrea Giuntini** of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia on the transformations wrought by the laying of global submarine telegraphic cables. **Ros Costelo**, PhD Student at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas-Universidad Complutense in Madrid, presented Spanish engineers as purveyors of ideas and technologies that were combined with local knowledge in the Spanish colonial Philippines and exchanged with experts representing other imperial powers. **Blessy Abraham**, a graduate student at the University of Delhi, offered a reassessment of Indian protectionist tariffs during the interwar period.

The final panel of the day, chaired by Professor **Radhika Singha** of Jawaharlal Nehru University, considered ideational and spatial definitional projects involved in the building and maintenance of imperial power, and featured presentations by Professor **João Paulo Pimenta** of the University of São Paulo and Professor **Mark Lincicome** of Columbia University. Professor Pimenta reflected on the asymmetrical connections between Brazil and other parts of the world during the early nineteenth century, as Brazil transitioned from seat of the Portuguese Empire to sovereign national state. Professor Lincicome considered the ways in which racial ideologies and geographical and cultural framings relative to “Asia” were mobilized in Australia and Japan, as each society embarked on nation- and empire-building projects.

Day two of the conference opened with a panel on ways in which ideas have been mobilized to both buttress and undermine imperial power. Professor **Raziuddin Aquil** of the University of Delhi served as the panel chair. **Matheus Cardoso da Silva** gave a paper on the role of the Left Book Club in forming a transnational network that circulated socialist ideas between the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe during the interwar period. **Kaustubh Mani Sengupta** of Bankura University presented on the transformative impact of new fort architecture introduced into eighteenth-century Calcutta by the East India Company, and the role of the fort in ordering urban space. PhD candidate at Jawaharlal Nehru University **Akash Bhattacharya** discussed how British imperial agents implemented the Bell-Lancaster Method in school education in sites across the British Empire. **Madhwi** of the University of Delhi concluded the panel with a discussion of the technologies developed and implemented by British imperial agents to facilitate the transport of indentured laborers.

The next session was chaired by Profesor **Bhairabi Prasad Sahu** of the University of Delhi, and examined some of the ways in which imperial powers shaped the form and politics of urban spaces. **Mike Desai** and **Madhavi Desai**, professors of architecture at CEPT University, gave a presentation on the global forces impacting the architecture, function, and meaning of the bungalow, which evolved from a dwelling designed by British military engineers in Bengal to a popular private abode. Professor **Zhu Ming** of East China Normal University examined connections between Milan, Madrid, and Mexico City as urban spaces that underwent significant change under Spanish rule, but that also transmitted ideas about form and function of urban space back to Europe. WIGH postdoctoral fellow **Shubhankita Ojha** discussed ways in which dock workers challenged imperial power by exploiting their unique position in port cities.

After lunch, conference participants had the great pleasure of visiting historical sites around the city that represent historical empires in Delhi from the ancient, early modern, and modern periods. Guests visiting India from countries around the world set off into the exhilarating tangle of Delhi street traffic, and were taken first to an Ashokan stone pillar edict dating from the third century BCE. At the Mutiny Memorial, participants paused to observe the monument, and to consider the layers of historical interpretation sedimented at that site. The tour concluded at the beautiful Lodi Gardens, where visitors appreciated the profusion of greenery and the impressive architecture of the mosque and tombs.

Capping off the evening was the conference keynote address, an engaging lecture titled “Between Empire and Nations: Changing Meaning of Sovereignty and Borders,” delivered by Professor **Sugata Bose** of Harvard University. **Madhavan Palat** served as the chair.

The third and final day of the conference began with a panel on “Empire and Anti-Colonialism,” chaired by Professor **Vibha Maurya** of the University of Delhi. **Sunny Kumar** of the University of Delhi traced the evolution of law against sedition from England, to British India, through to the modern Indian nation-state in order to interrogate ideas about democracy, sovereignty, and state violence. Professor **Daniel Gorman** of the University of Waterloo discussed collaboration between the London-based Movement for Colonial Freedom and African colonial nationalist and trade union leaders in the formation of a transnational anti-Apartheid movement, showing how ideas were shared between diverse colonial cultures to mount challenges against global empires.

The next panel, chaired by Professor **Babacar Fall** of Cheikh Anta Diop University, considered the movement peoples in the peripheries of empires, and between imperial centers. **Ana Carolina Hosne** of The National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina presented on ways in which early modern Iberian Empires, colonial Spanish America, and Ming and Qing China developed the category of the “barbarian” to signify peoples at the geographical and cultural limits of “civilization.” **Lucía Rodríguez Arrillaga** of the Universidad de la República in Uruguay discussed the process of territorialization in the contested region of Rio de la Plata as Iberian officials produced ways of knowing territory in this region that were later mobilized in other contexts. **Rahul Markovits** of the École Normale Supérieure gave the final paper of the conference, which examined the resources and networks that eighteenth-century Indian princes used to traverse Eurasia, and they ways they understood their identities as they crossed imperial boundaries.

The final panel featured professors **Sven Beckert** of Harvard University, **Mamadou Fall** of the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Senegal, and Professor **Mathias van Rossum** of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, each of whom offered broad reflections on global history generated by their own research and by the conference proceedings. Questions and important issues raised by the speakers and by the audience during the Q&A pertained to the enduring importance of nation-states and empires in shaping global connections, the position of the local within global history, and the enduring need to write against Eurocentric metanarratives.

The concluding discussion of the conference considered pedagogical approaches and challenges to teaching global history. Some challenges are enduring, such as the issue of language. While participants appreciated having a language in common to use in our exchange of ideas, the problem of language remains in terms of the readings available to assign to students. Institutions also constrain how global history can be taught. Curricular requirements and standardized syllabi, for example, can limit opportunities to implement truly global approaches in the classroom.

In final comments, faculty and students observed the common interest in flows reflected in the papers discussed over the previous three days – ways in which commodities, ideas, knowledge, educational and labor systems, architectural forms, and social movements flowed between colonies and imperial centers and across political boundaries. Some pointed to further work that needs to be done to explain the forces producing not only those mobilities, but immobilities as well. Others agreed, suggesting that the strength of global history in identifying entanglement and connectivity between distant places and diverse societies can also be harnessed to shed light on the structures, technologies, and kinds of relationships that produce both flows and blockages. As we continue our work of dismantling metanarratives that privilege the perspectives of empire, it was argued that in the present moment of rising nationalism, divisive attitudes, and great fear of difference, scholars of global history should also develop a new master narrative that insists that we have more in common than what sets us apart.