

Railway Imperialism Reconsidered: Colonialism, Infrastructure, and Power

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Since the 1950s, historians have regarded the intersection of imperial rule and colonial infrastructure as the straightforward story of means that achieved goals. Studies in the wake of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson’s work as well as the more technology-centered publications by Daniel Headrick have argued that railroads, alongside telegraph lines and steamships, were designed as instruments of imperial power. To this day, the majority of works on colonial railways tends to purport the linear narrative of “tools of empire” applied in the global periphery to ensure rule over territory and its economic integration, making the history of colonial railways a “very boring” field (Clapperton Mavhunga) that has been left to railroad enthusiasts and lacks in-depth debates.

Colonial railways, however, were more than just the materialization of great powers’s strategic interests. New approaches in the fields of cultural, imperial, and global history as well as the history of technology provide ample inspiration for rethinking their history. Recent works have shifted the focus from a functionalist approach of infrastructure to rather complex processes of negotiation, cooperation, and resistance that occurred in the context of both large-scale projects and everyday interactions. Canals, for example, introduced new forms of mobility (Valeska Huber) and were sites of a racialized and gendered order of labor (Julie Greene). Other scholars have analyzed how the spread of technology and the integration into global commodity

chains led to environmental degradation (Corey Ross; Pallavi Das). Transportation technologies altered social structures, and colonizers and colonized negotiated the meanings and values attached to them (Ritika Prasad; Jennifer Hart; Lyn Schumaker). Technologies as diverse as bicycles, sewing machines, or cars, as David Arnold, Kenda Mutongi, David Edgerton and others have pointed out, were also sites of collaboration, maintenance, and tinkering, resulting in long-lasting hybrid and mutating formations.

For colonial railroads, however, such new approaches to the history of technology have hardly been explored. This panel addresses this gap by reassessing the complex relationship between power, railroads, and colonialism. Railroads reinforced new power relations, but they were also co-produced by the social, economic, and cultural structures they encountered. Colonial railways enacted rule over new territories, but the forces they tried to control also relayed back to the metropolitan centers where this new infrastructure had been planned, devised, and produced. Lastly, railroads did not erase agency, but provided subaltern populations with new opportunities and changed strategies of response. Colonial railroads allow us to explore histories beyond the classic narrative of railway imperialism, and we welcome contributors interested in telling these stories. Contributions may include theoretical or empirical analyses, covering all topics, approaches, and geographical regions.

If the theme of the proposed panel is of interest to you, we invite you to submit a one-page **abstract** (maximum 500 words) and a one-page **short CV** with current contact information by 20 March 2019 to both organizers.