

Transimperial connections: men and women on the spot across the French and British empires (18th-20th centuries)

Keynote speaker:

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It is with you that I found my first masters – on my first stopovers in Aden, Colombo, Singapore, India, I had the revelation of your methods, so far from rigid uniformity, so diverse according to the countries to which they applied, so well adapted to places, to things and to men, so free of formalism, so simplified in administration, leaving such large initiative to local agents who were moreover reduced to the smallest number, with such a concern for hygiene and public health. And with what interest, from the beginning, I read the works that set out your colonial methods. I can still see myself, upon my arrival in Indochina, passionately reading the book on India by Sir John Strachey, which had just been published. I can affirm that from then on, I never ceased to fight for us to be inspired by the methods and concepts I admired so much in your work in all areas.¹

It was with these words that Hubert Lyautey (1854-1934) addressed the Royal African Society in 1928, after it had honoured him by awarding him its gold medal. The recognition by a British learned society of the work of a French general and colonial administrator, as well as his admiration for British colonial methods, illustrates how actors from different European colonial empires scrutinised their respective colonial theories and practices. This knowledge of the colonial empire of the "other," both a neighbour and a rival, could be empirical, as was the case with Lyautey's stops in British-controlled port cities, or more theoretical. Treaties, memoirs, and general works on colonial issues all facilitated the circulation of ideas and knowledge from one colonial empire to another, especially when these works were translated. Lyautey's quote is entirely in line with Linda Colley's assertion: "It is unwise and usually just plain wrong to make dramatic assertions about the characteristics and consequences of a particular empire unless you have checked out other empires first," especially when she adds: "Unless we approach the history of empires comparatively, we cannot appreciate how much the different imperial systems themselves regularly learnt and borrowed from each other."²

These transimperial connections are the subject of this conference, which aims to explore both the concrete phenomena of collaboration and the more informal connections as well as the circulation of ideas, theories, and colonial practices between the men and women on the spot in the British and French colonial empires. One can thus draw inspiration from what Richard Toye and Martin Thomas have called the "co-imperialism" of the British and the French, seeing the colonial and imperial phenomenon as an essentially collaborative project.³ While collaborative strategies are easy to identify, mimetic patterns, shared inspirations, or forms of intertextuality between representatives of different empires are sometimes harder to pinpoint.

¹ Hubert Lyautey, « Une œuvre coloniale en Afrique », *Journal of the Royal African Society*, Jan., 1929, Vol. 28, No. 110 (Jan., 1929), pp. 115-121 Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Royal African Society, p. 117.

² Linda Colley, « What is Imperial History? », in David Cannadine, *What is History Now* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2002.

³ Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing about Empire, Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum have developed a contemporary and digital metaphor, the "imperial cloud," which they define as a shared reservoir of knowledge from which colonial administrators of different empires drew inspiration.⁴ Ultimately, should we not conceive the "interactive system," the "vast interconnected world" that David Cannadine describes in his book *Ornamentalism* in reference to the British Empire, as an entity that extended beyond its borders?⁵

The study of these transimperial connections, whether concrete or more intangible, is essential to the development of the transimperial turn that Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Hée have called for. While research into the networked dimension of empires has considerably expanded the historiography, it has largely done so from the perspective of national history, focusing on circulations *within* empires rather than *between* them. If empires were, as Christopher Alan Bayly suggests, empires of information, it is doubtful that the circulation of such information was confined to national/imperial borders.⁶ Moreover, by the second half of the 19th century, circulations increased from one colony to another, without necessarily passing through the metropolises.

Some collective works, such as *Les empires coloniaux*, edited by Pierre Singaravélou, articulate the study of empire around a comparative approach to European colonial empires, particularly the French and British.⁷ These comparative perspectives certainly shed light on the similarities between the various empires, thus deconstructing discourses that present these empires as exceptions. However, this conference intends to further explore the circulation of knowledge, ideas, and practices from one empire to another. Furthermore, without denying or excluding it entirely, this conference seeks to go beyond the prism of mere rivalry, often evoked to characterise relations between the British and French empires, to explore the paradigm of collaboration. Indeed, few works frame the history of empires, particularly the French and British, within the same paradigm, like Jennifer Pitts' work *A turn to empire: the rise of imperial liberalism in Britain and France* (2005),⁸ which brings together British liberal thinkers and their French counterparts, or more recently, in her *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (2018)⁹, through the emergence of international law.

It is also relevant to examine these transimperial relations outside moments of crisis and tension, focusing on everyday relations and/or extended periods. Studying colonial actors' daily lives through archival research can reveal the contours of interpersonal relationships marked by friendship or enmity. For example, British Anglican missionary journals can be cross-referenced with the diaries of the French Catholic *Pères blancs* in the Great Lakes region at the end of the 19th century, to tell a story of collaboration between Europeans, far from the national and religious conflicts highlighted in the published archives of missionary organisations.

⁴ Christoph Kamissek et Jonas Kreienbaum, "An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge", *Journal of Modern European History*, vol. 14, issue 2 (2016): 164-182. doi 10.17104/1611-8944-2016-2-164

⁵ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism, How the British Saw Their Empire*, London: Allen Lane, 2001.

⁶ Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁷ Pierre Singaravélou, éd., *Les Empires coloniaux, XIXe-XXe siècles*, Lonrai: Points, 2013.

⁸ Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

⁹ Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

The term "men and women on the spot" is understood here in a broad sense. The focus of this conference is indeed on the autonomy of the colonial periphery, not only those at the top of the colonial hierarchy in the field—governors, high commissioners, and viceroys—but also on the "small hands" of empire, middle-rank colonial administrators, missionaries, simple soldiers, and liaison agents in border areas, whose networks were not necessarily built through the imperial metropolis. Special attention will be given to women, often invisible actors in colonial history and in these transimperial exchanges. Anglophone historiography has already delved deeply into the initiatives of the "man on the spot," who often put metropolitan authorities in a position where they had to deal with *faits accomplis*, such as Sir Charles Napier, who annexed the Indian princely state of Sindh in 1842 in defiance of the strong opposition expressed by Robert Peel and his cabinet.¹⁰ However, the aim here is to study how interpersonal relationships and more or less formal ties with actors of another imperial power, combined with local interactions, also influenced the formation of colonial policies or theories. Pierre Singaravélou describes very well the importance of men and women on the ground in transimperial circulations when he writes: "Networks of administrators, freemasons, missionaries, athletes, journalists, and settlers structured these flows of knowledge, information, and administrative practices across the British or French Empires."¹¹

We can thus examine relationships between scientists, such as botanist Nathaniel Wallich, who maintained close links with his French counterparts in Pondicherry and Chandernagore, or in the Great Lakes region of Africa, with missionary John Roscoe, a friend and correspondent of anthropologists James Frazer and Alfred Haddon; or soldiers, such as Charles Callwell, a military theorist who openly admired Marshal Bugeaud. Trade partnerships, such as between the British East India Company and the free merchants of Pondicherry, could provide further case studies. Similarly, it would be relevant to study those administrators who were involved in the decolonisation process and to focus on the field of cultural diplomacy, as the two imperial powers sought to maintain a form of informal influence after the independence of their colonies.

The existence of collaboration processes between local elites and colonisers has been highlighted by several historians of Empire, starting with Ronald Robinson in his seminal 1972 article "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration."¹² Since then, his framework has been expanded through the work of historians including David Cannadine, Linda Colley, and Anil Seal. There is also a considerable body of literature on solidarities between nationalisms in the colonial context, favoured by Benedict Anderson's work on "imagined communities," which highlights the circulation of nationalist ideas and resistance tools across national boundaries.¹³ However, this interpretation of the colonial phenomenon tends to be situated within the paradigm of the internal workings of empires, leaving much scope for an alternative focus on transimperial collaborations between European colonial powers. In 2022, Damiano Matasci and Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo devoted an issue of the *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique* to this transimperial approach¹⁴.

¹⁰ Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 283.

¹¹ Pierre Singaravélou, éd., *Les Empires coloniaux, XIXe-XXe siècles*, Lonrai: Points, 2013, 21-22.

¹² Ronald Robinson, « Non-European foundations of European imperialism: sketch for a theory of collaboration », in, Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, *Studies in the theory of imperialism*, London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972.

¹³ Anil Seal. *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 2006.

¹⁴ Matasci Damiano et Bandeira Jerónimo Miguel (2022), « Une histoire transimpériale de l'Afrique : concepts,

Our conference follows this research dynamic but will focus primarily on the French and British empires, whose extent and influence require us not to broaden the focus any further, even though we are aware of the interest in doing so. However, we will accept more marginal proposals that address transimperial collaborations with other European colonial powers present in territories under British control or influence.

In particular, we welcome proposals on any of the following themes:

- Circulations of racial and cultural representations of colonised societies
- Circulation of colonial models and policies, such as indirect rule
- Establishment of transimperial diplomatic or scientific networks at the local level
- Cosmopolitanism and transimperial sociabilities
- Transimperial neighbourhoods, relations with border areas
- Colonial literature, translation, and transimperialism

This conference will take place on **November 3rd and 4th 2025 at Jean Jaurès University in Toulouse**. Proposals of about 600 words, along with a short biography, should be sent in either French or English by **12 May 2025** at empireandafter@gmail.com

SCIENTIFIC COMITEE

- Alice Byrne, LERMA, Aix Marseille University
- Simon Deschamps, CAS, Toulouse Jean Jaurès University
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