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Embedded Empire:
The United States and Colonialism¹

This cartoon by Victor Gillam was published in the spring of 1899, a time of political turmoil for the United States.² After intense debate, the U.S. Senate had recently ratified the peace treaty with Spain, which transferred the Philippines, Guam, Cuba and Puerto Rico to American control. The U.S. also annexed Hawaii and later added Wake Island (1899), parts of Samoa (1900), the Panama Canal Zone (1904) and the Virgin Islands (1917) to its colonial empire.

¹ I would like to thank Jonas Kreienbaum (Rostock), Thoralf Klein (Loughborough) and Florian Wagner (Florence) for their insightful commentary and helpful suggestions.

² V. Gillam, «The White Man’s Burden (Apologies to Kipling)», in: Judge Magazine 36, 1.4.1899.
While the Senate’s ratification of the Treaty of Paris enabled the acquisition of colonies, it did not end the national debate over the merits and pitfalls of colonial empire. Both imperialists and anti-imperialists mobilized public opinion for their respective causes with a wide range of political, historical, and ideological arguments in a debate that deeply divided American society.3

Both sides referred to the experience of other past and present colonial empires. While the advocates of empire described colonialism as a beneficial force for international order and the spread of modern industrial civilization, recommending a path of inter-imperial learning for the United States, the critics of empire depicted colonial empires as forces of violence and exploitation with corruptive and degenerative repercussions for the imperial metropole. They, too, recommended learning such lessons from the history of other empires.

In this controversial climate, Gillam’s cartoon framed inter-imperial lesson-learning as a joint Anglo-American imperial project of civilising uplift.4 The image depicts John Bull and Uncle Sam, personifications of Great Britain and the United States, carrying racially stereotyped representations of their respective colonies through a boulder field towards the mountain top of civilisation. While a stern, surefooted and determined John Bull leads the way through the rocky field of perceived civilisational challenges, a taller and leaner Uncle Sam strenuously attempts to follow the leader’s pace but lags behind.

Almost two decades ago, Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler initiated a new research agenda with their question: «To what extent – and by what processes – did the knowledge of individual empires become a collective imperial knowledge, shared among colonising powers? Was there ever a language of domination crossing the distinct metropolitan politics and linguistics barriers of French, English, Spanish, German and Dutch?»5

This article provides a preliminary exploration of American English as contributor and «user» of this trans-imperial «language of domination». It asks how transferable knowledge was identified, located, acquired, stored, interpreted and communicated. It suggests that the U.S. colonial empire was deeply embedded in international networks of imperial power. From Samoa to the Philippines, and from Panama to Puerto Rico, U.S. colonies were in frequent conversation and exchanges of knowledge with neighbouring German, British, French, Japanese and Dutch colonies.


Such networks of imperial and colonial knowledge exchanges constituted a powerful epistemic asset for the globalising dynamic of the industrial core and shaped both colonies and metropoles in profound ways. Interimperial knowledge transfers from European pendants and Japan thus framed discourses of U.S. colonial rule in many fields such as environmental management, tropical medicine, banking reform, drug control and governance.

1. Reference Frames, Imperial «Clouds» and «Blind Spots» on the Map of Empire

Victor Gillam’s cartoon skilfully visualised widespread interest in interimperial lesson-learning in turn-of-the-century America. Many contemporaries argued that the United States had insufficient experience in overseas colonisation and thus required tutoring from other empires. As the largest and most successful of the modern empires, Britain appeared to many imperial enthusiasts as a trusted and admired reference point, a standard against which they measured their own nation’s performance.6

Such reference processes constituted one of the most important features of the nineteenth century.7 Knowledge exchanges had always characterised human interaction across the globe, but the degree of reference density among nation states and empires remarkably intensified with quantum-leaps in transportation and communication technology. From the 1850s onwards, a powerful upsurge of internationalism through standardisation, rationalisation and modernisation accelerated the drive towards integration in the world’s industrial core.8

In many nations, including the United States, these transformative processes were often driven by and politically legitimised through the comparative assessment of perceived national shortcomings. Internationalism deeply affected America’s socio-economic and political organisation during the Progressive Era, and created new pathways and platforms for the integration of governmental and non-governmental actors into international networks of knowledge accumulation, appropriation and exchange.9

These encounters presented a wide range of opportunities for intercultural transfers. Such transfers were driven by a sense of the nations’ own shortcomings that fostered the interest in the appropriation of ideas, concepts, cultural artefacts and institutions from societies held in high esteem. The motives for such appropriations ranged from commercial interests to scientific curiosity or the wish to improve international or domestic standing. Transfers and international referencing were often instrumentalised to contain domestic criticism or to solidify the influence of institutions or individuals. Knowledge was subsequently collected, stored, transported, interpreted and modified.10

Reference filters provided a compass for the navigation of such transfer sequences. These filters were defined by cultural and ideological discourses and predispositions. In the American case, they encompassed at least three mutually reinforcing, overlapping and also conflicting interpretative frameworks and reference filters: nationalism with its assumptions of a distinctive, even exceptional difference; globalism with its pronounced emphasis on modernity, interconnectivity and a robust claim to leadership; and imperialism with its settler colonial experiences, habits and repertoires. These intersecting frameworks influenced the selection of reference societies, identified practices, and «know-how» deemed transferable and guided the appropriation and adaptation process.11

Empires constituted important microcosms and contact zones of intra-imperial connections and interimperial exchanges in this globalised reference network. They are increasingly understood as nodes in a global network characterised by multidirectional information flows and knowledge exchanges.12 While competition and conflict undoubtedly influenced the relations among imperial powers, they were equally bound together by a dense net of cooperative features and the entangled realities of colonialism.13

10 As a starting point, see T. Adam, Intercultural Transfers and the Making of the Modern World. Sources and Contexts, New York 2012.


13 Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton recently observed: «Though it was clearer to contemporaries who lived through this period than it has been to many historians of modern empires, traffic of various kinds linked empires. Migrant workers, missionaries, social reformers, highly educated professionals, and humble pilgrims, as well as money, commodities, technologies, and even diseases, moved among imperial systems. In some key domains – such as environmental science, medicine, and social policy formation – there was a coordinated collaboration between empires, while complex flows of printed texts and popular cultural artifacts meant that some ideas moved easily across imperial boundaries.» T. Ballantyne / A. Burton, «Empires and the Reach of the Global», in: E.S. Rosenberg (ed.), A World Connecting 1870–1945, Cambridge, MA, 2012, 285–434, 295; on entangled colonialism, see U. Lindner, Koloniale Begegnungen. Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880–1914, Frankfurt a. M. 2011.
Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum have captured this notion of cooperative colonialism as a shared interimperial project through their appropriation of a digital metaphor and practice. The «imperial cloud» signifies a shared imperial knowledge reservoir without specific location and is accessible from a variety of metropoles, and possibly even peripheries.\textsuperscript{14}

An exploration of how such an interimperial «cloud» was created and utilised, as well as how its architecture, which transcends locality and content evolved over time, can draw on a vibrant historiography of the new imperial and global history. Its analytical and metaphorical emphasis on connections, circuits, networks, nodes, currents and flows has explored interimperial epistemic cooperation across nation-states and empires in an emerging turn-of-the-century global society.\textsuperscript{15} In addition, a wide variety of disciplines and fields, which range from transnational history to political science, literature and urban studies, have provided methodological insights into the study of such knowledge flows, which have often been described as transfer, translation, encounter, emulation, and entanglement.

The U.S. experience of overseas colonial empire and its role in the «imperial cloud», however, is often curiously absent or marginalised in this innovative yet still Eurocentric historiography on interimperial epistemic networks.\textsuperscript{16} While the transimperial relevance of nineteenth-century American settler colonialism or the American South has received some attention, the U.S. colonial empire remains largely absent from studies of global imperial integration, which is all too often confined to the world of European empires.\textsuperscript{17}

This omission is in part the result of a century of obfuscation in American commentary on colonialism. With its discursive recourse to exceptionalist nationalism and its rhetorical demarcation from European imperialism, such commentary helped to obscure the U.S. colonial project as anti-European decolonisation. This American discourse emphasised the nation’s anti-colonial origins, underlined the legitimacy of its imperial outreach after 1898 as humanitarian intervention, and


\textsuperscript{16} A recent conference report on interimperial transfers, for example, concluded that «[…] the canon of imperial transfer studies needs to be expanded geographically by including the US as empire […]».


developed semantic conventions through which U.S. colonialism was alternatively understood as either a non-empire or a brief and inconsequential detour from the path of national development.

Over the last decade, studies of the American empire have experienced a renaissance. In response to the Bush Administration’s bellicose foreign policy, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the creation of new surveillance bureaucracies after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, much of this path-breaking new research has explored the multiple interactions and connections between the American nation state and its empire. While this historiography has imaginatively engaged the *intra-imperial* modalities of U.S. colonialism, the empire’s *interimperial* connections remain to be charted.

2. Travelling Experts and the Search for Colonial Expertise

Travel constituted an important form of knowledge gathering and comparative observation. Travellers encompassed tourists, missionaries, businessmen, scholars and colonial officials, utilising their encounter with the world to compare and contrast their own nation with others and to locate America on the map of global civilisation.

Engineers were among the most avid travellers and often pursued postgraduate training abroad; they gathered work experience in empires across the world, regularly exchanged insights at international conferences and congresses, and travelled widely in search of professional expertise.

For engineers in the service of the U.S. colonial government in the Philippines, such travel destinations were often located in neighbouring Dutch, British and French colonies in South and Southeast Asia. A typical example was George G. Stroebe’s visit

to Java in June of 1916. Stroebe, who had been an instructor of civil engineering at the University of Michigan from 1904 to 1911, worked as a hydraulic engineer in the Bureau of Public Works in Manila. After twelve years in the colonial service, he would later serve as chief survey engineer on the Yangtze River Board in China.

In 1916, Stroebe travelled to the island of Java in the Dutch East Indies to study colonial irrigation practices. He prepared his tour with extensive readings of Dutch colonial history and policy. While in Java he interviewed colonial officials, exchanged information about construction procedures with Dutch engineers, informed himself about port installations in Surabaya and toured irrigation projects throughout the island.

Stroebe was favourably impressed by the technical expertise of his Dutch colleagues and the impact of extensive irrigation on agricultural production. He identified Java as a model of best practice for purposes of improving hydraulic works in the Philippines. At the same time, however, Stroebe was also critical of other aspects of Dutch colonial rule, in particular colonial schooling and urban sanitation systems. His advocacy of knowledge transfer from Java to the Philippines was thus selective and limited to his specialised field of expertise.

Experts in other U.S. colonies also travelled to study neighbouring colonies. Knowledge networks of tropical hygiene were of particular importance to medical officers stationed in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Panama Canal Zone.

The turn-of-the-century American discourse on the tropics employed ambivalent and contradictory images. Visions of tropical paradise sharply contrasted with widespread apprehensions about the limits of tropical acclimatisation and increased disease susceptibility. During and after the Spanish-American War and with tensions intensifying in the Philippine Islands, frequent reports of virulent epidemics such as cholera, typhoid, malaria, smallpox and dysentery amplified American perceptions of the tropics as a hotbed of disease.

The military’s devastating medical experiences in Cuba prompted a number of fact-finding commissions to look into the methods and procedures of tropical acclimatisation.

\[\text{\[24\] J.J. Blussé has studied the interaction between Dutch and American engineers in the region in: «Missionaries of Modernity: Technocratic Ideals of Colonial Engineers in the Netherlands Indies and the Philippines, 1900–1920», MA Thesis, Leiden University 2012.}


matisation of British troops.\textsuperscript{28} In December 1898, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Maitland O’Reilly, the designated Chief Surgeon for the U.S. military occupation force in Cuba and later Surgeon General of the United States, travelled to Jamaica as part of this coordinated effort to study British military methods of tropical hygiene.\textsuperscript{29} O’Reilly’s mission was to investigate British lessons with regard to the housing, clothing and nourishment of soldiers in tropical climates and British techniques of containing or preventing the spread of yellow fever, dysentery and malaria in Jamaica.\textsuperscript{30}

O’Reilly’s recommendations had far-reaching consequences for the U.S. Army’s sanitary and health regimes. His report facilitated the introduction of new khaki-coloured uniforms and tropical helmets. It also emphasised the importance of food hygiene and liquor control. Finally, the insights gained from O’Reilly’s inspection tour of Jamaica provided pragmatic arguments for the improvement of colonial military barracks and the construction of the highland-sanatorium «Camp John Hay» in the Philippines.

In addition to engineers and medical doctors, economists constituted a third group of professionals deeply engaged in interimperial knowledge exchanges. After 1898, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, Washington’s «colonial office», hired a group of specialists to modernise the economies of its colonial empire. The members of this group, Jacob Hollander in Puerto Rico, as well as Charles Conant, Jeremiah Jenks and Edwin W. Kemmerer in the Philippines, enjoyed substantial responsibility and creative leeway in the reconfiguration of local economies, and most of them would go on to have influential careers as foreign economic advisors.\textsuperscript{31}

The colonial system afforded this group a relatively unrestricted testing ground for their economic concepts, which they framed in a professional managerial discourse. They helped to reform local currencies by moving the colonies to the gold standard, rationalised the tax system, centralised banking systems, introduced new accounting techniques, and provided new credit and savings institutions.\textsuperscript{32} Edwin Walter Kemmerer was instrumental in the development of such an institution in the Philippines.

In 1904, he was tasked by his superiors to conduct a feasibility study for an agricultural bank, that is, a credit bank for farmers to provide investment capital and stimulate agricultural productivity. Such a concept had been proposed by Filipino elites but the U.S. government was uncertain about the distribution of public-

\textsuperscript{28} On military lesson-learning: see D.J. Vetock, Lessons Learned: A History of U.S. Army Lesson-Learning, Carlisle Barracks, PA 1988, especially 26–36.
\textsuperscript{32} Rosenberg / Rosenberg, «From Colonialism to Professionalism», 61.
private roles and responsibilities in such an institution. Over the course of six months, Kemmerer examined numerous European and non-European credit bank models. Cognisant of the colonial government’s concern about extensive involvements in the banking sector, he proposed a hybrid of public and private partnership.33

His recommendations of February 1905 were based on his study of the Agricultural Bank of Egypt that had been organised only a few years earlier. This proposal for a transfer of Anglo-Egyptian colonial financial «know-how» to the Philippines garnered much support in Manila because it emphasised mutual benefits for creditors, investors and the colonial government alike. In addition, the Kemmerer plan was considered a realistic project because its author proactively diffused racialised criticisms against the credibility of the bank’s potential clients.

By emphasising that Britain’s proconsul in Egypt, Lord Cromer, who enjoyed celebrity status among American imperialists, had praised the fiscal discipline of Egyptian fellaheen, Kemmerer transimperially connected the ethos of successful Egyptian and potentially successful Filipino farmers. This discursive tactic was designed to contain objections against extending agricultural credits to the colonised, and enable the urgently needed economic revival of colonial Philippine agriculture.

While Kemmerer’s superiors in Manila were convinced of the transfer project’s potential merits, they also feared congressional opposition in Washington and thus directed him to collect further evidence during an on-site visit to Egypt in March of 1906. During his tour, Kemmerer not only collected data from bank officials and government representatives, but interviewed Lord Cromer, the main force behind the Egyptian Agricultural Bank.

Kemmerer’s second report prominently featured Cromer’s positive assessment of the agricultural bank’s clients, but more importantly underlined the potentially «modernising» and stabilising impact on the socio-economic and political front that the credit scheme would have on colonial governance. Deeply impressed by such assessments, the members of the U.S. Congress in Washington passed the Agricultural Bank Act based on the Anglo-Egyptian model in 1906.34

While the Philippine Agricultural Bank’s future was less successful, its inception provides a good example for a hybrid model of interimperial transfer, characterised by distance study and on-site inspection. As the cases from environmental management, colonial medicine and economics amply demonstrate, U.S. colonial specialists often found their own nation’s expertise wanting and compensated these

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34 War Department, Bureau of Insular Affairs, Report on the Agricultural Bank of Egypt to the Secretary of War and to the Philippine Commission by E.W. Kemmerer, Special Commissioner to Egypt, 1.6.1906, Washington, DC 1906, digital at: http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hnf5kg;view=1up;seq=3 [accessed on 10.3.2014].
deficiencies through the acquisition of specific colonial «know-how» from other empires.

In addition, these inspection tours also played an important role in the politics of the colonial bureaucracy because they often provided an edge in interdepartmental struggles over budget allocations or created an aura of expertise to defray or contain political criticism. The Bureau of Public Works, for example, was under scrutiny for shortcomings in flood control and irrigation planning when George Stroebe visited Java. In a similar way, the U.S. Army was criticised for its failure to adequately protect the health of American soldiers in the tropics when Maitland O’Reilly embarked on his inspection tour of Jamaica.

Finally, such visits also helped to underwrite transcolonial social relations, and constituted an important and reassuring element in the social fabric of the small colonial elite. Travel mitigated the widespread sense of isolation often felt by colonial experts, instilled a transimperial esprit de corps, and fostered their self-perception as members of a global epistemic community, thus obfuscating the fundamentally violent nature of their colonial endeavours.

3. The Politics of Travel – the Opium Commission

In contrast to the travels of individual experts who often focused on narrow and specialised colonial issues, commissions explored a broader panorama of policy choices. They promised a scientific approach to problem-solving and appeared as the most orderly of all information collection missions. Their official character afforded them authority, access to information and substantial funding, while it was hoped that their perceived «apolitical» and scientific nature would divert or contain the anti-imperial opposition in the United States. The politics of opium control by the United States highlighted the mechanics of such colonial commissions.

In the Philippines, opium had provided a major source of revenue for the Spanish colonial administration, as it did for other imperial powers in their respective colonies. The Spaniards established a distribution system similar to that of other European empires in Southeast Asia, in which the government imported opium, sold it to successful bidders who were required to organise the further sale, prohibit smuggling and ensure that it was only accessible to Chinese residents in the Philippines. After 1898, the U.S. continued with much of the profitable Spanish opium policies and simply replaced the bidding process with high import taxes on the drug.

While U.S. opium policies never ventured far from the Spanish colonial precedent, the decision to return to the previous empire’s approach to licensing the opium trade caused a firestorm of protests in the United States. Protestant mission groups in the Philippines, in alliance with domestic reform groups, forced the Roosevelt Administration to revisit its colonial opium practices.

The missionary advocates of moral reform were highly respected because of their extensive first-hand knowledge of the colonial world and its transcolonial realities in Southeast Asia. They operated in transnational networks, which had criticised the opium trade for years and argued in support of strict prohibition as the civilising mission of the colonial project, in particular its religious dimension, was morally corrupted by the lax and hypocritical regulation of drugs. They understood empire as a moral reform project in which drugs, alcohol and prostitution had no place.  

In defence, U.S. colonial administrators contextualised their approach by referring to the transimperial standards in the region. They claimed that prohibition of the drug was not only impractical but also impossible as the experience of British, French and Dutch colonial regimes had illustrated. However, the moral reformers demanded that the United States should adhere to its proclaimed exceptionalist ideational foundations and rejected the emulation of European powers. Instead, they recommended a thorough examination of Japanese opium control policies in Formosa.

In order to contain further domestic opposition and with presidential elections on the horizon in 1904, the Roosevelt Administration appointed a fact-finding commission to explore the usage, traffic and regulation of opium in Southeast Asian colonies. Between August 1903 and January 1904, the committee travelled for five months through Japan, Formosa, Burma, Java, French-Indochina, the Malay Straits Settlement, Hong Kong, Shanghai and the Philippines. During their on-site visits, they conducted interviews with governors, colonial administrators, physicians, missionaries and legal scholars, and gathered large amounts of statistical evidence, demographic and public health reports, and copies of colonial laws and regulations.

In their final report, the committee argued that French and British colonies were too heavily involved in the opium trade to abolish it. In some colonies, more than half of the colonial budget was financed through opium sales. They also concluded from their visit to Burma that any policy of regulating drug use along ethno-
cultural lines was ineffective. Most importantly, the committee was deeply impressed with the Japanese approach of «progressive prohibition», which the final report characterised as uniquely effective. The Japanese model was also held in high esteem by moral reformers in the United States.

The Japanese approach was an attempt to balance moral reform with concessions to the realities of drug dependency. The colonial government in Formosa had a monopoly on the import and distribution of opium. It registered and licensed all existing users but prevented the creation new addicts through strict distribution regimes. Ultimately, according to the rationale, opium use would simply disappear over a span of 30 to 50 years.

Convinced by this approach, the report recommended a government monopoly and the licensed registration of all opium users in the Philippines. Immediate prohibition, while demanded by many reform groups, was deemed unrealistic. However, unlike the Japanese model, the American transplant advocated the reduction of the permissive period of licensed use to only three years, after which all non-medical uses were prohibited. During the three-year intermediate period, opium revenues were to be used to finance the rehabilitation of drug users.38

While the complete government monopoly for opium distribution did not materialise in the Philippines, most of the committee’s recommendations were put in place. In March 1905, the U.S. Congress passed a law prohibiting the import of opium into the Philippines after March 1908. While the use of opium remained legal in many Southeast Asian colonies until World War Two, American colonial officials and missionaries became increasingly convinced that a solution to the opium question could only be found in a coordinated transcolonial policy initiative. Somewhat ironically, after it had transferred colonial knowledge from the Japanese empire to its own, the United States now presented itself as the leader in the fight against opium and initiated the International Opium Commission in Shanghai in 1909.

4. Media, Pathways and Interpreters

The opium commission’s work constituted an influential example for the politics and mechanics of interimperial learning. However, it also offered a glimpse at the practical challenges encountered by those tasked with the quest for colonial «know-how», ranging from deficient transportation infrastructures to the need for voluminous translations and interpretations, as well as occasional political interferences.39

Beyond such limitations, not everyone could travel to distant possessions to gather knowledge through personal observation and interaction. Many of those tasked with debating and deliberating the broader outlines of colonial policy decisions in government, Congress and the general public had to rely on «pre-pack-
aged» knowledge and its accompanying interpretations. Interimperial and transcolonial knowledge was thus stored in and communicated through archives, government reports, books, articles, maps and photographs.

The Spanish Archives in the Philippines laid the epistemic foundations for U.S. colonial rule of the islands.\textsuperscript{40} The extent and depth of the roughly 5 million pages of documents was impressive. The documents reflected a fine-grained record of the political, social, ethno-cultural, religious, economic and legal organisation of the Philippines throughout the Spanish period. In addition to their informational content, those files also provided an impressive analytical and interpretative grid for Americans coming to terms with the task of overseas colonial rule. The interpretation of this knowledge was a two-step process of making documents in Spanish and Tagalog accessible to the new rulers through translations into English and of providing an interpretation of content to those unfamiliar with the historical, cultural and thematic specificities and contexts.

Those literal and cultural translations were carried out by various colonial offices in the Philippines and other U.S. colonies. Continuities in personnel in a number of key administrative and legal areas ensured that staff was on hand to explain why, how and with which result the previous colonisers had made specific decisions. For example, Manuel de Yriarte, the principal archivist under the Spanish regime in Manila, continued his work as first Chief of the Bureau of the Archives in the U.S. colonial administration. Such seamless continuity underlines the pervasive and intimate connectivity between two colonial regimes despite all rhetorical demarcations of the new American empire in Asia.\textsuperscript{41}

Government reports and bibliographies constituted a second instrument of knowledge production, interimperial acquisition, storage and communication. A representative example of such often extensive undertakings was the four-volume report of the First Philippine Commission under the direction of Jacob Gould Schurman, president of Cornell University.\textsuperscript{42} Using a wide array of Spanish sources, the report provided an overview of the conditions on the islands as well as a detailed specific reference to art and architecture: «The Spanish Craze in the United States: Cultural Entitlement and the Appropriation of Spain’s Cultural Patrimony, ca.1890–ca.1930», in: Revista Cumplutense de Historia de América 36 (2010), 37–58.


\textsuperscript{41} R.L. Kagan has outlined these ambivalences with

historical analysis of Spanish colonial governance; it also outsourced research on
geography, mineralogy, climatology, botany and ethnography to the Jesuit Order of
Manila.

At the same time, the report went beyond a mere look at the Spanish precedent
and incorporated a substantial discussion of British colonial models. For this pur-
pose, the commission contracted Montague Kirkwood, a British lawyer in the serv-
ice of the Japanese Empire and expert on colonial governance in Asia. He contrib-
uted a detailed analysis of administration, demographics, finances, military and
police forces, and of legal systems of India, Burma, Ceylon, the Federated Malay
States and the Straits Settlement.

The final product presented to the U.S. President in January 1900 rested on
three pillars: the colonial experience of Spain in the Philippines; British varieties of
colonial rule in South and Southeast Asia; and the American historical experience
of territorial rule since the eighteenth century. The committee’s recommendations
combined those observations in a number of knowledge fields into a mix of national
traditions and international insights.

A further type of government report focused on comparative statistical analysis
such as Colonial Administration, 1800–1900: Methods of Government and
Development Adopted by the Principal Colonizing Nations in their Control of
Tropical and Other Colonies and Dependencies (1901), compiled by statisticians in
the Department of Treasury under the directorship of Oscar Phelps Austin.43 The
four-hundred paged analysis provided a thorough and «scientific» overview on the colonial systems of
the world, underscoring the commercial benefits of colonialism. This report served
as a widely distributed reference handbook throughout the U.S. colonial empire.

Finally, the Library of Congress became an initial clearing house for information
about global colonial systems and data on U.S. colonies. At the request of policy-
makers, chief bibliographer Appleton Prentice Clark Griffin compiled extensive
bibliographies on comparative colonisation and on Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, the Phil-
ippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico.44

43 O.P. Austin, Colonial Administration, 1800–1900: Methods of Government
and Development adopted by the Principal Colonizing Nations in their Control of
Tropical and other Colonies and Dependencies, Treasury Department, Bureau of
;view=1up;seq=7 [accessed on 3.3.2015]; Austin was an outspoken
advocate of the commercial advantages of colonial empire, and published widely in
magazines and newspapers. His comparative work and that of fellow statisticians in the service of empire have
received very little attention: M. R. Haas, Prophets and Observers. Two
Statisticians of the New American Empire, Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University,
1975; for the international context, see U. v. Hirschhausen / J. Leonhard, Empires
57.

44 On comparative colonisation: A.P.C. Griffin, List of Books with References to
Periodicals Relating to the Theory of Colonization, Government of Dependencies,
Protectorates, and Related Topics, Library of Congress, Division of Bibliography,
b3643161;view=1up;seq=3 [accessed on 12.3.2015]; on his Philippine bibliography, see also Griffin’s
L. Thompson, Imperial Archipelago. Representation and Rule in the Insular
Territories under U.S. Dominion after 1898, Honolulu, HI 2010, 41 n24.
Both scholarly and general books and articles formed a third tier of knowledge storage and communication. While material for a general audience was initially sparse, the number of publications drastically increased after 1899. Books played a central role for all approaches to knowledge acquisition and increased in importance as direct physical involvement with colonial locales decreased. In a telling commentary on the process of knowledge acquisition from December 1899, Secretary of War and chief architect of U.S. colonial policies Elihu Root wrote to a friend: «The first thing I did after my appointment was to make a list of a great number of books which cover in detail both the practice and the principles of many forms of colonial government under the English law, and I am going to give them all the time I can take from my active duties.»

That Root assembled a reference library of mostly British texts on colonial law and governance was certainly no coincidence, but reflected a strong sense of Anglo-American affinity that gained momentum in the United States in the late 1890s. At the same time, such a pragmatic decision might have either been an expression of linguistic limitations or a reflection of the initial lack of reliable, specialised literature on other colonial systems.

The available information was often condensed and in article format, written by scholars, government officials and journalists, and published in so-called «learned magazines» such as North American Review, McClure’s, National Geographic or Atlantic Monthly. Sometimes those magazines produced special editions that were lavishly illustrated and complemented by detailed maps that allowed readers not only to learn about the nation’s colonies but also to situate the American colonial empire in a broader transimperial context.

Photography proved a particularly popular medium for knowledge transmission because of its perceived authenticity, which mirrored that of on-site visits. At the same time, much of the photography in the American empire displayed a similar fascination with the «exotic» as did its European counterparts. Photography also provided a glimpse of life in other empires in at least two ways: Firstly, it contrasted and compared Spanish and American rule, and visually amplified the discursive demarcation by the opposition between the new and the old colonial powers. Secondly, it offered a wide audience an impression of the activities of other colonial powers.

45 The «new-possession» books are discussed in: Thompson, Imperial Archipelago, 31–37.
Many photo series emphasised infrastructural deficiencies in previous Spanish colonies and contrasted them with the improvements made by the U.S. colonial state thought «before and after» shots. The Spanish heritage was depicted as quaint yet backward while U.S. rule was illustrated as the pinnacle of modernity through its rule based on progressive scientific methods.\textsuperscript{49}

An illustration for this type of contrasting representation was the *National Geographic Magazine*’s 1902 photographic essay «American Progress in Habana» on sanitary improvements and beautification projects during the U.S. military occupation of the city.\textsuperscript{50} The visual essay juxtaposed streets, houses, parks, hospitals and dams before and after the arrival of the U.S. occupation forces, thereby reminding the magazine’s readership not only of the negligence of Spanish rule but also of its detrimental effects on the mentalities of the colonised. Such interpretative trajectories conjured images of tropical indolence, which bred disease and disaster; conversely, America’s modern methods of hygiene and sanitation and their forceful application served, in the essay’s visual logic of Lamarckianism, as an exercise in character transformation.

While such stories echoed a sense of American pride in its purported exceptional way of empire, photography also resonated with colonial discourses in other empires. Tropes of cleanliness and civilisation, which Anne McClintock so pointedly described as «soft-soaping empire», and notions of environmental determinism and Lamarckianism were not an exclusively American but a transimperial phenomenon. The extensive usage of such tropes in U.S. colonialism indicates how well Americans spoke the «language of imperial domination» and how deeply the nation’s colonial empire was embedded in the transimperial flows of ideas and practices of rule by differentiation.\textsuperscript{51}

At the same time, photography afforded American empire-builders and critics alike glimpses of life in other empires. From the Caribbean to Africa, Asia and Oceania, images of distant colonies reached the remotest corners of the United States. What emerged from this medium was an iconography of interimperial rule. Images of distant ethnicities under colonial rule reassured Americans that their imperial aspirations were part and parcel of a global project in which individual empires, specific ethno-cultural groups and locals mattered less than the overarching principles of the «White Man’s Burden».

\textsuperscript{49} Michael Adas has identified these «before-and-after» comparisons as influential discursive strategies in the colonial Philippines. See Adas, *Dominance by Design*, 169.


American academics, especially historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists and their learned societies took a lead role as interpreters and communicators of these global imperial contexts. To be sure, the academic community in the United States also included many critics of the empire. However, the advocates of imperial expansion drew much governmental and public attention, and were welcomed for their expertise. In the spirit of the Progressive Era’s desire for orderly scientific approaches to governance, economics and society, these scholarly organisations were part of America’s colonial vanguard. Scholarly work informed government decision-making, helped to frame public debates and contributed to colonial administration through the service of scholars as colonial officials.\textsuperscript{52}

After the defeat of Spain in 1898, many scholarly organisations quickly established special committees for the study of colonial systems. Historians were among the first to respond to the new empire. At its annual conference in 1898, the \textit{American Historical Association} appointed a special committee to study the colonial practices of other empires. Other disciplines followed suit. The annual conferences of political scientists, historians, sociologists and economists soon boasted an impressive array of comparative analysis in colonial administration, law and finance. Professional journals published and translated the latest European work in the field of «colonial science», published ever increasing numbers of American studies on colonial subjects, and created special book review sections on empire and colonialism.

Not everyone agreed that interimperial knowledge was relevant and some scholars detested the application of European imperial experiences to the new American empire. Others rejected the acquisition of colonies as a violation of American political traditions, while a third group sharply criticised the shortcomings of European empires, yet utilised the comparative method of analysis to «scientifically» distil the most valuable lessons for the United States. Scholars from the humanities and social sciences advanced interimperial comparisons and transcolonial knowledge «mining» as pragmatic techniques to shape their nation’s colonial policies.\textsuperscript{53}

The delineations between specialised and general discourses on the merits of empire were in flux as many scholars took to the lecture circuits, condensed their studies into texts for a general, non-specialist audience, and contributed to high-circulation magazines and newspapers.


\textsuperscript{53} Schmidt, «Political Science», 683.
A number of scholars also alternated between theory and practice through service in the colonies. The political economists William Willoughby and Jacob Hollander from Johns Hopkins University occupied important positions in the administration of Puerto Rico as did legal scholar Leo S. Rowe from the University of Pennsylvania. Dean C. Worcester, a zoologist from the University of Michigan, Bernard Moses, a historian and political scientist from Berkeley, and economist-turned-ethnographer Albert E. Jenks served as high-ranking colonial administrators in the Philippines.

Some scholars personified interimperial transfers as wanderers between empires. They used their expertise acquired in one empire for a career in another. Alleyne Ireland was such a transnational and interimperial actor. Born and raised in a literary family in Manchester, he also studied briefly in Berlin, but never completed his university education. Ireland spent a decade travelling through colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, and visited the United States shortly after the Spanish-American War. While American society was engaged in the great debate between advocates and opponents of colonial empire, he skillfully used his British background and travel experiences to his advantage as he recognised a chance for personal advancement.54

Ireland proposed the creation of a Department of Colonial Affairs for the University of Chicago to train the future administrative elite of the U.S. colonial empire. Chicago hired him as a professional lecturer and special commissioner for the study of Colonial Affairs. While the university launched a wide range of courses for all those interested in colonial service, Ireland engaged in a flurry of lectures and publication projects. His output was impressive as he published six books and more than 30 articles between 1899 and 1907.55 Ireland utilised widely read magazines such as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Outlook* or *North American Review* to advance his comparative approach, and provided detailed case studies of colonial governance in French, Dutch and British colonies in Asia.

In the end, the university and Ireland went separate ways due to questions of research funding. The department of colonial studies (and the government colonial service) never materialised, and of Ireland’s projected twelve-volumed handbook of tropical colonisation, only the two-volumed study, *The Province of Burma* (1907), was ever completed. Yet, at a crucial juncture in American deliberations over empire, Ireland, the transnational agent of imperial expertise, made important contributions to the popularisation of the comparative approach to colonial empires.

54 Ireland’s background and career are described in: F. Ng, «Governance and American Empire: America Colonial Administration and Attitudes, 1898–1917», Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975, 75–87.

55 For a selection of his writings: Schumacher, «Lessons of Empire», 82 n35.
5. Conclusions: The United States and the Imperial «Cloud»

On Tuesday, 26 May 1931, nearly two thousand invited guests assembled for the opening of the American exhibit at the «Exposition coloniale internationale» in Paris. It was the first time that the U.S. government had officially sanctioned participation in a European colonial fair. The main building of the American exhibit was an exact replica of George Washington’s home at Mount Vernon and a number of annex buildings displayed anthropological artefacts, ethnographic taxonomies and «evidence» of colonial «accomplishments».

While government planners had originally envisioned live ethnographic shows, visitors to the U.S. exhibit grounds in Paris had to contend with a 23-member «Indian band» managed by a private promoter. The Hoover Administration had decided against ethnographic exposition because of budget limitations, but the decision was also made because the administration was cognisant of potential protests against such displays in U.S. colonies.

After the band had played the «Marseillaise» on this opening day, a number of American and French dignitaries made their official remarks. For the United States, Ambassador Walter Evans Edge outlined his government’s policies on imperial questions. He explained: «Though not a colonial power in the accepted sense of the word, my country, because of its colonial origin, presents to mankind a concrete example of the full flowering of intelligent and successful overseas development. In other words, while not possessing colonies itself, it [the U.S.] is nevertheless proud […] to join with France in the realisation of this magnificent review of progress overseas.»

The utter irony of such remarks at the opening of a colonial exhibit and its inherent denial of America’s imperial past must have escaped Ambassador Edge. Or did it? The seasoned diplomat employed the American semantic and ideological conventions of the time, most importantly: The United States as a former colony did not rule over colonies but over territories and possessions, and the United States did not seek empire for self-aggrandisement but merely to «lend assistance».

While the ambassador was diplomatic enough not to chastise his hosts for their imperial shortcomings, others were less restrained in their commentary on European colonial rule. Since the eve of the First World War, American criticisms of European imperial performance became a staple of political discourse. Francis Burton Harrison, Governor-General of the Philippines from 1913 to 1921, even went as far as to re-interpret the U.S. approach to the islands as an anti-colonial model that had irritated the established European powers because it undermined the legitimacy of their rule.


57 MacDonald, «Mount Vernon Reproduction», 1.

58 F.B. Harrison, Corner Stone of Philippine Independence. A Narrative of Seven Years, New York 1922.
In reality, the United States had extensively relied on European, and especially Spanish, expertise to consolidate its empire. Spanish colonial knowledge infused virtually every aspect of American rule in Madrid’s former colonies. Even Harrison’s title of Governor-General of the Philippines was borrowed from the despised previous imperial power. After 1898, the United States had initially replaced this Spanish title with that of Civil Governor. According to William Howard Taft, governor at the time of the title change, this practice had caused unnecessary confusion. He advocated a return to the old Spanish form because it would be recognisable to Filipinos. The change was made official in February of 1905.59

This small detail of administrative (re)naming indicated how deeply U.S. rule was indebted to Spanish precedent. However, Americans were also sensitive to imperial hierarchies of prestige. They obfuscated their «data interlinks» and the true extent of information transfer from Spanish sources in the server architecture of the «imperial cloud». They denied such imperial continuities and proclaimed its colonial empire as a radical break with past norms, traditions and repertoires of imperial rule.

Beyond the frequent reiteration of the claim that the U.S. colonial project constituted a radical break with past imperial traditions and practices, Americans were deeply embedded in the global network of interimperial knowledge exchanges. The metaphor of the imperial cloud captures this experience of connectivity and exchange well, and helps to illustrate how Americans, who had been tasked with colonial state-building, were avid borrowers from the knowledge cloud because their initial «downloads» by far exceeded their contributions to this network. American imperialists collected colonial knowledge, which they identified, stored, transported, and communicated through their extensive travels, fact-finding missions, archives, books, articles, maps and photographs. The required information was often translated to make it linguistically accessible and culturally comprehensible. Over time, however, Americans would also make distinctive contributions to the cloud in fields such as tropical medicine, public hygiene, policing, and environmental resource management.

But the agents of the U.S. colonial project were also discerning users of the cloud. They would often, as their refusal to acknowledge the centrality of Spanish cloud contributions to their rule in the Philippines demonstrated, admit only to what public opinion deemed acceptable «downloads» whose «certificate of authenticity» would be consistent with the nation’s historical, ideological and cultural reference filters. Such limitations, although to a lesser degree, were also applied to Japan, which was viewed by many Americans with a mixture of admiration, fear and racial contempt.

Curiously, such concerns of respectability and prestige could produce different hierarchies in different transnational knowledge reservoirs or clouds. For the United States, two clouds were of particular importance between the 1880s and the 1930s: the imperial cloud and the social reform cloud. The latter contained globally produced information on progressive reform efforts to mitigate the challenges of industrial capitalism. In this cloud, U.S. progressive reformers gave much credence to the experiences of nations from which they shied away in the imperial cloud. Spanish prison reforms played an equally important role as did municipal reform projects in Belgium, and it is likely that Germany constituted the most important reference society for U.S. social reformers, while its prestige in the imperial cloud was tarnished by what Americans perceived as a militaristic and antagonistic attitude. In the two simultaneous cloud systems, the hierarchies of prestige could differ substantially even though both clouds intersected due to the progressive reform cloud’s substantial impact on the configuration of the U.S. colonial empire. In a curious reversal of roles, even Britain played a less prominent role in the reform cloud than it did in the imperial one. While its inventive spirit in areas such as public housing inspired Americans, its \textit{laissez-faire} economic thought disappointed American economists, who were enchanted with German concepts of political economy.

In the imperial cloud, however, Britain ranked without doubt at the top of the prestige ladder for American users. The fact that an ex-colony now assumed colonial power, and that it turned for advice to its former imperial centre from which it had separated in a bloody war of independence, presented a double irony. While this surprising turn of events fuelled much criticism, it did not prevent the enthusiastic and intensive Anglo-American discourse on empire-building.

Cultural proximities and a racialised kinship of Anglo-Saxonism played their role in the «great rapprochement» between both powers and the subsequent «special relationship». Equally important was the American respect for the accomplishments of the British Empire in fostering the civilisatory «advancement» of the colonised. However, this respect was also the result of the American recognition that the United States operated in a British world system. While relations with Germany and Japan were largely defined by regional competition, Americans initially confined themselves to a junior role in relation to the only global empire. It is in the context of Anglo-American relations that the metaphor of the imperial cloud has at least two analytical limitations in explaining power and national ambition.

The first limitation concerns the highly suggestive ethereal nature of the cloud, which downplays its material foundations. The concept of the imperial cloud insists that it was neither bound nor belonged to a single empire. In addition, access to the cloud could hardly be restricted by any actor or group of actors. While the American experience mirrors those claims, it also complicates them.
The imperial cloud, similar to any knowledge depository, relied on hard infrastructure. Clouds, after all, depend on the earth’s surface or they would not exist at all. The ubiquitous notion of a digital cloud’s openness and translocality is thus partially misleading because the entire system of this abstraction is underwritten by an elaborate hardware infrastructure. While today’s digital clouds rely on a network of linked data centres, the imperial cloud’s effectiveness depended on globally integrated transportation and communication networks. Thus, the ability to connect and secure information hubs was as critically important in the early twentieth century as it is today. Century-old maps of submarine cables reveal not only an astonishing degree of unevenness in global information networks, but also underline the dominance of the British Empire in the field of global information infrastructure. In many ways, such visualisations illustrate how information networks reflected and reproduced power differentials in international relations.

American imperialists experienced those power hierarchies regularly on their pilgrimage to the colonial office in London. Their diaries and letters are replete with details about those visits, which were part of the maturation and socialisation of any self-respecting colonial official in the U.S. empire. While the imperial cloud had a multi-local existence, its American users understood that the underlying hardware structure had centres and peripheries.

This infrastructural fragmentation effect was, secondly, exacerbated by the pull forces of nationalism and fundamental unresolved tensions between competitive nationalist aspirations and internationalist outlooks. This was, for example, evident in the ability of the United States and Britain to establish preferential information sharing in projects such as global resource inventories at the simultaneous exclusion of other empires from such knowledge gathering exercises.

While the cloud metaphor beautifully captures the idea of an open, omnipresent and inclusive entity, it simultaneously minimises the fractured and at times exclusionary nature of the imperial (and digital) knowledge depository. While the imperial cloud did not belong to any one empire, which granted exclusive access, it had core nodes, centres of gravity, and a hardware infrastructure that reflected hierarchies of power among empires.

Such limitations were of little interest to U.S. colonial specialists. For those scientists, engineers, legal experts, and economists, interimperial learning constituted a simultaneous acknowledgment of their own nation’s shortcomings and a belief in the power of international professional expertise. Most were less interested in colonial work as a national endeavour, but perceived themselves as members of a global epistemic community. They interpreted the task of ruling colonies as a reflection of their specific skill sets, and shared similar scientific managerial outlooks with professional colleagues across empires.

For American policymakers, however, the cloud represented a convenient and strategic self-service data collection through which they were able to acquire knowl-
edge for the nation’s advancement. While the cloud metaphor suggests an ability to bridge atavistic nationalism, the imperial knowledge reservoir was grounded equally in cooperation and competition.

While improved and integrated transportation and communication networks provided important structural pathways for the integration of the United States in transimperial epistemic networks, the United States utilised these networks to simultaneously shape their configuration and establish control over important network interlinks. While clouds of water vapour traverse national boundaries with ease, neither the imperial nor its contemporary pendants in the digital world reached this level of transcendence.

Interimperial integration through shared knowledge was an important dimension of the imperial world. However, for America’s political-imperial elites, such integration translated into neither unequivocal support for other imperial regimes nor the softening of its nationalist ideology of exceptionalism. While America thus enthusiastically and strategically used experienced tutors to perfect its «colonial language of domination», it simultaneously denied their impact, inspiration and authority.

Embedded Empire: The United States and Colonialism

This article examines the process of interimperial knowledge transfer for U.S. colonialism between the late 1890s and the interwar period. The article analyses the platforms, pathways and knowledge circuits of U.S. colonial experts. More specifically, it explores the role of intergovernmental commissions, information media and interpreters of colonial «know-how». It traces how reports, photographs, books and articles, expositions, professional organisations and academics shaped the administrative, legal, economic, environmental, medical, military and technological discourses on colonial empire in the United States. While the nationalist ideology of exceptionalism, with its strong dosage of anti-European rhetoric, infused American discourses of empire, the U.S. colonial project in the Caribbean Basin and the Pacific Ocean relied heavily on colonial ideas and practices developed by European powers and the Japanese Empire. While the British Empire served as an important reference point, the influence of Spanish, Japanese and American settler imperial insights was considerable. At the same time, American experiences also contributed to a global reservoir of colonial knowledge and were studied by many settler and colonial empires. While the United States was thus an important participant in global imperial knowledge exchanges, its nationalist ideological inventory simultaneously denied such proximities and borrowings.

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ABSTRACT