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**“The Hidden Hand of
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by

BENJAMIN GAILLARD-GARRIDO

ABSTRACT

Conventional global histories usually narrate the epochal shift of order that succeeded both World Wars as the passage from colonial subjugation to national independence. New historians of empire and capitalism, however, have complicated these narratives and shown the continuities between both periods. Their work has led them to challenge the former conceptions of empire on which these conventional histories relied. By leaning on their recent insights, this paper intends to contribute to the larger refiguring of the notion of empire that has been taking place in contemporary historiography. Arguing for an anchoring of histories of empire within histories of political economy and for a networks-based approach to state as well as non-state actors, its main aim is to convey that empire should be conceived of not as a thing or a territory, but as a “social relation.” This conceptual turn would allow historians to unravel the various forms of unthinking that conventional notions of empire carry. In turn, this shift in focus would spur important debates concerning the limits of global history. The question would ultimately be: where does the *unthought* of global history itself lie?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous global histories narrate the epochal shift in order that succeeded both World Wars as the passage from colonial subjugation to national independence. The period stretching from the fall of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires to the independence of the Global South is thus generally portrayed as the pivotal point between a world of empires and a world of nation-states. New historians of empire and capitalism, however, have complicated these narratives and shown the continuities between both periods.¹ Their work has led them to challenge the former conceptions of empire on which conventional narratives relied. By leaning on their recent insights, this paper intends to contribute to the larger refiguring of the notion of empire that has been taking place in contemporary historiography. Its principal focus is thus a theoretical one. It is about the concepts and methods we mobilize when we write *modern* imperial history.² Its argument is fourfold. Firstly, it will call for an anchoring of histories of empire within broader histories of political economy. Secondly, it will argue for a networks-based approach of state as well as

non-state actors straddling political, economic, and cultural spheres. Thirdly, following Paul A. Kramer, it will advocate for a theoretical shift from the term of “empire” to the *concept* of “the imperial.” Lastly, it will encourage historians interested in analysing the intentionality of imperial actors to resort to ethnographical and anthropological approaches, mainly from anthropology of state and of institutions. What these arguments all seek to convey is that empire should be conceived of not as a thing or a territory, but as a “social relation.”³

In their research, recent historians have shown how the “durable hold of th[e] narrow definition of empire among scholars”⁴ has hampered the ways in which they write about empire. This definition has indeed clouded trajectories and structures whose histories would be better understood if we were to place them under a lens attuned to the category of “the imperial.” By questioning previous accounts of empire, decolonization and capitalism, new histories have indeed come to challenge their premises. The first one of these is the “old, legalistic”⁵ “definition of empire as territorial control,”⁶ which “narrow[s] the imperial to the state control of

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- 1 For summaries and reviews of this literature, see Paul Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the U.S. in the World,” *American Historical Review* (December 2011): 1348-1392 and, by the same author, “How Not to Write a History of the U.S. Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (November 2018): 911-931.
 - 2 Its scope thus does not cover, for example, the Roman, the Inca, or the Aztec empires.

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- 3 Stuart Schrader, “Imperialism after Empire,” *Boston Review*, March 19, 2019, <https://bostonreview.net/war-security/stuart-schrader-imperialism-after-empire>
 - 4 Kramer, “How Not to Write a History of the U.S. Empire,” 915.
 - 5 John Gallagher and Roland Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): 7.
 - 6 Kramer, “How Not to Write a History of the U.S. Empire,” 914.

territory,"⁷ and usually goes under the label of "formal empire." As Gallagher and Robinson wrote in their seminal 1953 article, focusing on the "formal empire" alone is "like judging the size and character of icebergs solely from the parts above the water-line."⁸ It leads the analyst focusing on imperial histories astray. Another questionable premise is the contraction of a nation's political sovereignty to its legal expression, or so-called "formal" sovereignty. This premise struggles to differentiate between "formal" and "substantial" sovereignty. Its major flaw is that it diverts from refined analyses of state sovereignty that dissect financial, economic, military, diplomatic and cultural asymmetries and in so doing draws the analyst into arguments that rest on fuzzy premises. Undeniably then, historians are "very much at the mercy of [their] own particular concept of empire."⁹ The important question they should be asking themselves is this one: which silenced histories, which imperial topics lie out there, waiting to be unearthed by a revised imperial optic?

Furthermore, I argue that this narrow definition of empire has obscured the persistence of imperial structures and networks in our contemporary world. The formal definition of empire is the cornerstone of traditional narratives that showcase the period of

decolonization as the transition from a world of empires to a world of nation-states. These narratives discount Ann Laura Stoler's critical observation that "blurred genres of rule are not empires in distress but imperial polities in active realignment and reformation."¹⁰ They therefore contribute, wittingly or unwittingly, to the concealment of empire in the allegedly "post-imperial" world of nation-states.

Last but not least, the changes in the structure of capitalism and the emergence of a "global ruling class,"¹¹ as well as what Samuel Moyn has described as "the ideological dissociation of liberalism and empire, after more than a century of long and deep connection,"¹² compel us to operate a conceptual shift in our ways of thinking about empire. Thus, beyond historiographical concerns, I believe that a revised concept of empire is necessary if one also wishes to understand contemporary imperial configurations. A critical vocabulary is necessary not only for robustly critical historiographies of empire and capitalism, but also for critical analyses of our contemporary world.¹³ This shift of optic should

7 Kramer, "Power and Connection," 1349.

8 Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," 1.

9 Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," 1.

10 Ann Laura Stoler, "On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty," *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 138.

11 See William I. Robinson and Jerry Harris, "Towards a Global Ruling Class? Globalization and the Transnational Capitalist Class," *Science and Society* 64, no. 1 (2000): 11-54.

12 Samuel Moyn, "Imperialism, Self-Determination, and the Rise of Human Rights," in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde and William I. Hitchcock (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 172.

13 Kramer, "How Not to Write a History of the U.S.

contribute to devising not only past, but also present imperial phenomena in a more fine-grained manner.

Before exposing each of these arguments, however, I will demonstrate how salient global imperial networks were before the advent of the nation-state system. I will argue that their significance for contemporary history writing can best be unearthed if we adopt a lens attuned to “the imperial,” which allows us to chart the “long-distance connections and interactions” between polities, networks, and political economies.¹⁴ Here, Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan’s concept of “imperial formation” will prove particularly useful in addressing this first conceptual hurdle.

2. IMPERIAL FORMATIONS: RENDERING EMPIRES COMMENSURABLE

European imperial polities and their offshoots enclosed much of the globe by the turn of the twentieth century. Along with the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Russian empires, the United States also embarked on a trajectory of imperial expansion. From the seventeenth century onwards, as wealth became the nerve of power, these rival empires engaged in a political, economic and cultural competition from the North Atlantic to

Southeast Asia. They were all part of an imperial political economy whose defining trait was the mobilization of “state power to achieve territorial footholds and access to the commodities, markets, and labour-power needed for industrial-capitalist competition.”¹⁵ One telling example of these imperial connections are the projects for agricultural and pauper colonies devised by the French government in the middle of the nineteenth century:

French blueprints for agricultural and pauper colonies drew on strategies of empire, strategies that scholars have often presumed followed European models. However, French observers in the nineteenth century, for example, also considered initiatives by Catherine II and her successors in Russia to be exemplary efforts to create a reasoned empire through colonization. As France turned to Russia, Russia in turn looked to the American West for models of settlement and expansion. Such borrowings that stretched from France to Russia and Russia to the United States of America mark a competitive politics of comparison that accelerated circuits of knowledge production and imperial exchange.¹⁶

These imperial ties were dense and extensive. As a means of capitalist integration, then,

Empire,” 917.

14 Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1351.

15 Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1359.

16 Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, “Refiguring Imperial Terrains,” in *Imperial Formations*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2007): 3-42, here 4.

imperial networks straddling across polities spawned histories whose shared political and discursive economies that still resonate today. Nevertheless, nation- and state-centred histories and historiographies have obscured the history of the "exchange of principles, practices and technologies between empires in their metropolitan regions and far-flung domains" and their significance for our present.¹⁷ These "long-buried connections" now appear as "dislocated from each other and from the commensurabilities that once linked them."¹⁸ Indeed, nation-state centred historiographies have severed national from imperial histories: as "the nation form increasingly 'captured' history, imperial histories became nationalized in manners that obscured [the] imperial formations [that preceded them] altogether."¹⁹ Briefly said, the nation-form "erases" past and present imperial polities. However, since the seventeenth century imperial expansion, capitalist integration, state building, and regimes of political-economic discipline "were not separately conceived and executed projects with wholly different architects and different names."²⁰ The question therefore arises, how can historians meaningfully shed light on these

overshadowed and entangled pasts?

As I have argued, Stoler and McGranahan's concept of "imperial formation" might prove useful as a clearing ground for historians seeking to weave together what at first glance may seem as disparate imperial histories. The authors adapt their notion from Althusser and Balibar's concept of "social formation" which describes the "concrete complex whole comprising economic practice, political practice, and ideological practice at a certain place and stage of development."²¹ Recognizing the important contributions of the cultural turn, they "include cultural practice in [their] configuration to stretch [their] concerns to a broader set of practices structured in dominance."²² The advantage of Stoler and McGranahan's concept is precisely that it points to an extensive range of practices cutting across scales, thus inviting the historian into exploring narratives of power and connection that stretch between networks, state, and non-state actors, across different political economies.

While Stoler and McGranahan's notion of "imperial formation" is useful to direct our gaze towards state and non-state practices that might not have been perceived as imperial had another analytical category been applied, their concept also carries several shortcomings. First of all, it lacks a political-economic anchor. Second,

17 Stoler and McGranahan, "Refiguring Imperial Terrains," 4.

18 Stoler and McGranahan, "Refiguring Imperial Terrains," 5.

19 Stoler and McGranahan, "Refiguring Imperial Terrains," 21.

20 Stoler and McGranahan, "Refiguring Imperial Terrains," 4.

21 Stoler and McGranahan, "Refiguring Imperial Terrains," 8.

22 Stoler and McGranahan, "Refiguring Imperial Terrains," 8.

the Althusserian notion of “*social formation*,” from which they derive their own, might end up neglecting the centrality of government and politics, which are essential when it comes to imperial projects, precisely because of its overemphasis on the “social.” This may result in a category of analysis that is, in itself, depoliticizing. Because of its genealogy, then, the category of “imperial formation” could have a hard time tackling matters of sovereignty and power asymmetries, in which political economy and forms of government are essential variables. However, the adjective “imperial” in “imperial formation” does prove adequate to address this danger, provided we understand it correctly. Still, the main advantage of the category of “imperial formation” lies precisely in its ability to render formerly bound practices commensurable and historically relevant again. This is promising for historians seeking to critically engage not only past but also contemporary global imperial polities. The next sections will explore promising avenues for delineating a productive concept of empire for historical and contemporary analyses.

3. RETHINKING “EMPIRE”

3.1 POLITICAL ECONOMY

As I have argued, past imperial practices share trajectories whose commensurability has been overshadowed by nation-centred

and state-centred historiographies. In other words, many contemporary conceptualizations of empire are informed by sets of categories that emerged with the nineteenth-century advent of the nation-state. However, empire-building and commercial expansion – two defining features of modernity – form the historical matrix of past and present dynamics of capitalist integration. Now, as wealth became the crucial underpinning of power in the early modern period, practices and discourses of government, and practices and discourses of political economy became increasingly intertwined. While political-economic thought largely provided the resources with which actors reflected on empire, imperial expansion itself had an impact on discourses and practices of political economy. Capitalist political economies and imperial modes of government have thus, since then, stood in a dialectical relationship. This is why anchoring histories of empire within broader histories of global political economy should be the starting point for any critical analyses of empire.

The proximities between imperial government, commercial expansion, and political economy can be traced to the early modern period. At the turn of the seventeenth century, positive balances of trade, credit finance, and colonialism became “central nodes in the expanding web of capitalist control.”²³

23 Jerome Roos, “The New Debt Colonies,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, February 1, 2018, <https://>

The trajectory of early eighteenth century Scottish financial architect John Law, for example, is a prime illustration of the “intimacies” between empire and political economy²⁴. Acting on behalf of the French Crown, Law created what came to be known as his “System”, a political-economic program, which “is universally regarded as a landmark in history of finance.”²⁵ According to John Shovlin, however, its impact on latter capitalist political economies has been underestimated. It should nonetheless be taken seriously into account, since, as could be argued, what renders modern empires commensurable is, first and foremost, their shared political economy.²⁶

The 1719 creation of the French *Compagnie Perpétuelle des Indes* under Law’s aegis, best exemplifies his contribution to the merging of public finances with colonial ventures – and thus of political economy with empire. The *Compagnie* embraced all French colonial commerce and took over part of the unfunded French public debt. His project to transform France’s economic and financial system followed the prior English model. The newly created Banque

de France would issue credit-backed notes and, together with other chartered joint-stock companies, also sell shares to the public in order to ensure monetary expansion.²⁷ Public finance backed by credit and public finance backed by trade thus merged. This fusion typifies the symbiosis between expansionist political economies and imperial modes of governing. John Law laid down the blueprints of modern political economy, and thus of empire, by uniting what Istvan Hont has called “Jealousy of Trade” – a polity’s anxious focus on maintaining positive balances of trade – with what John Shovlin has termed “Jealousy of Credit” – a polity’s “anxious watchfulness directed toward the public credit of rival states.”²⁸ For contemporary analyses, Law’s trajectory is also strikingly significant. Law’s description of his “System’s” benefits for French hegemony echoes subsequent features of British and U.S. imperialisms. With his “System”, Law argued, France would “command other nations without dominating them and give them the law without usurping any of their rights.”²⁹ This account shares similarities with contemporary strategies of economic penetration, which achieve their goals “by funnelling capital indirectly through powerful local intermediaries”³⁰ or

www.viewpointmag.com/2018/02/01/new-debt-colonies/

- 24 I borrow the concept of “intimacy” from Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2015), 17-21.
 25 John Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit: John Law’s “System” and the Geopolitics of Financial Revolution,” *The Journal of Modern History* 88 (2016): 275-305, here 276, and Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010).
 26 Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit,” 276.

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- 27 Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit,” 279.
 28 Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit,” 278.
 29 Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit,” 283.
 30 Gilbert M. Joseph and Allen Wells, “Collaboration and Informal Empire in Yucatán: The Case for Political Economy,” *Latin American Research Review* 18, no. 3 (1983): 204-218, here

by dominating peripheral polities through “asymmetrical economic partnership agreements leading to deep integration.”³¹ While Law’s trajectory is a case in point for our argument, the objection could be made that it is only that: *a* trajectory. By weaving it together with contemporary imperial practices, the risk we run is that of homogenizing a plurality of imperial political-economic histories. However, the subsequent influence of Law’s “System” and its significance for understanding our present should not be underestimated. Law’s economic and geopolitical vision largely influenced latter political-economic and imperial thinkers.³² As John Shovlin argues, the “structural significance” of the System “has often been elided by historians.”³³ Moreover, in his article, Shovlin is too quick to separate the financial aspect of Law’s System from its commercial correlate, so that his argument ends up understating the intimacies between capitalist finance and imperial ventures. These intimacies should be taken into account when approaching imperial formations from a political-economic angle.³⁴

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31 Alfred Zack-Williams, “Neo-imperialism and African Development,” *Review of African Political Economy* 40, no 136 (2013): 179-184, here 179.

32 Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit,” 297-300.

33 Shovlin, “Jealousy of Credit,” 276.

34 For a compelling account of the structural embeddedness between colonial trade, discourses on society, and discourses of political economy, see Andrew Sartori, “From Statecraft to Social Science in Early Modern English Political Economy,” *Critical Historical Studies* (Fall 2016): 181-214.

Historians of empire anchoring their enterprise in political-economic histories can thus make significant contributions further linking, either synchronically, early eighteenth century French political economy, French colonial expansion, and empire, or diachronically, eighteenth century European expansion and contemporary capitalist integration. The latter procedure is all the more vital since the “structural dependencies and asymmetrical power relations intermediated by the globalized logic of financial markets” – to which globalized commercial, technological, and security structures are intimately tied – can better be analysed if we envision them as heirs to the early modern period’s political economy.³⁵ As we have argued before, formal transformations in the world of polities should not conceal the “continuity in change” of global political-economic trajectories. The common matrices of past and present imperial political-economies that Law’s trajectory – arguably an example among countless others – serves to illuminate are better understood if we approach them through the lens of political economy. Capitalist power relations are indeed “the historical ground within which [imperial, and subsequently,] nationalized state power grew.”³⁶ Evaluating polities’ historical

35 Roos, “The New Debt Colonies”

36 Kramer, “Embedding Capital: Political-Economic History, the United States, and the World,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15 (2016): 331-362, here 336.

trajectories from a political-economic perspective can thus add to our understanding of empire's formal and informal, national and transnational, as well as structural and networked aspects. Reframing histories of empire "in methodological terms, as political-economic history,"³⁷ will therefore undoubtedly contribute to historians' inquiries into imperial polities. These analyses are all the more vital in today's "post-imperial world" where, in spite of appearances, empires do subsist.

3.2 NETWORKS

Just as institutions were always embedded in capitalism, modern capitalist formations were always embedded in state and non-state institutions. In the case of empires, "their existence and unity was [and is] made possible by supranational connections" and global networks of state, but also, crucially, non-state actors.³⁸ While these connections upheld empire, empire in return fostered networks that went beyond imperial boundaries. However, a state-centred approach to empire has tended to lay too strong an emphasis on governmental actors, thus neglecting imperial networks whose reliance on state structures has varied substantially. While

imperial formations have regularly mobilized state power to achieve their objectives, too exclusive a focus on state actors and structures ultimately obscures the relevance, as well as the density of other, at first glance not necessarily state-related imperial networks. One early concept marshalled to address this issue was that of "informal empire." However, by dividing "both imperial practices and types around the issue of state and corporate control,"³⁹ it implied that "capital's disciplines were separable from and looser than governmental ones,"⁴⁰ thus "abstract[ing] the relationship between state and capital."⁴¹ The term "informal empire" therefore "introduced as many problems as it solved."⁴² Ultimately, the notion's "utility crumble[d]" when historians finally showed "governments' active role in building [informal empires]."⁴³

The concept of networks, on the other hand, can contribute to highlighting state and non-state actors, thus shifting the focus towards analyses of their embeddedness in imperial contexts and transcending the unproductive distinction between imperial "formality" and "informality." Frederick Cooper, for example, "argues for the value of the network concept in analysing with greater precision long-distance connections over extensive periods of time."⁴⁴

37 Kramer, "Embedding Capital," 333.

38 Andrew Thompson, "Afterword: Informal Empire: Past, Present and Future", in *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital*, ed. Jean Grugel, David Howard, Tony Kapcia, Geoffrey Kantaris (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 234.

39 Kramer, "Power and Connection," 1357.

40 Kramer, "Embedding Capital," 338.

41 Kramer, "Power and Connection," 1357.

42 Kramer, "Embedding Capital," 338.

43 Kramer, "Embedding Capital," 345.

44 Thompson, "Afterword," 234.

This emphasis on the continuity and resilience of networks is particularly useful, for example, in the case of France and its former colonies, where economic, commercial, military, cultural and political networks have upheld and deepened sets of structural dependencies and asymmetrical power relations. One of the risks a misuse of the network concept entails is that of partaking in liberal narratives of capitalist globalization, which convey tropes of liberating flows and emancipatory connections and interactions.⁴⁵ Here, a political-economic anchor could remind transnational historians of what these networks, ultimately, were – and still are – all about. That is, “high-stakes, multi-scale struggles over resources, economic power, and material survival.”⁴⁶ Historians should keep in mind that imperial networks are, more often than not, “networks of power relationships affecting structures,”⁴⁷ as Joseph and Wells argue in their case study of Yucatán.

And, since we’re writing about power, accumulation and strategies for their preservation, thinking in terms of imperial networks can help to unearth the intrusive “tools [...] intended to transform entire political economies, [such as] military and police training, political and economic expertise and education, technical assistance,

foreign loans, and the pressure of financial institutions.”⁴⁸ Here, for example, histories of neoliberalism could benefit immensely from a networks perspective. Such a polymorphous, dynamic and evasive historical movement as neoliberalism, with ties to state and non-state actors, and with a considerable impacting capacity in terms of shaping macro-policies at a global level, can best be grasped only if we inquire into its web-like, networked aspect.⁴⁹ We could also mention histories of the VoC or the EIC, straddling governmental and non-governmental spheres of action and influence.⁵⁰ Lastly, a networks-based approach would be extremely useful in shedding light on structures of global counterinsurgency, such as the one Kyle Burke traces in his *Revolutionaries for the Right*,⁵¹ or as the one Nakil Ak’abal identifies as straddling diachronically from Algeria to Guatemala via South Vietnam, Argentina, and Israel.⁵² In

45 For critiques, see Louis A. Pérez, Jr., “We Are the World: Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 558–566.

46 Kramer, “Embedding Capital,” 352.

47 Joseph and Wells, “Collaboration and Informal Empire in Yucatán,” 212.

48 Kramer, “Embedding Capital,” 338.

49 Also bearing in mind that histories of neoliberalism are intimately tied to histories of empire. Adom Getachew, for example, argues that neoliberalism is less a “post-imperial project than a moment of empire’s reinvention”. See her review of Slobodian’s *Globalists* in *H-Diplo*, Roundtable Review 20, no. 27 (2019): 5-8. For a compelling account of neoliberalism from a network perspective, see Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018.

50 See, for example, Julia Adams, *The Familial State. Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

51 Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

52 Nakil Ak’abal, “Under the Shadow of the

these cases of counterinsurgency, private security firms, such as today’s Blackwater, played a crucial role sometimes within and at other times exceeding governmental scrutiny.⁵³ As an imperial private contractor, approaching Blackwater through a networks perspective could be promising for those interested in shedding light on the symbiosis between state and non-state imperial actors.

4. FROM “EMPIRE” TO “THE IMPERIAL”

This essay was intended as a contribution to the larger refiguring of the notion of “empire” that has been taking place in contemporary historiography. It argued for an anchoring of histories of empire within histories of political economy and for a networks-based approach to state as well as non-state actors, straddling economic, political, and cultural spheres. In this sense, its focus was principally a theoretical one. Its aim, however, is political. Its intent is to clearly state that empire – both past and present – should be conceived of not as a thing or a territory, but as a social relation. In order to do this, and following

Paul A. Kramer, I will now argue for a theoretical shift from the term of “empire” to the *concept* of “the imperial”. As an adjective, Kramer’s concept of “the imperial” stresses *transitivity* and thus puts a much-needed emphasis on the relational aspect of imperial power. It is therefore relevant not only in terms of history-making, but also in terms of articulating contemporary political resistances to imperial networks.

“The imperial” “refers to a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation.”⁵⁴ As such, the category of “the imperial” not only contains but also points towards the categories of networks and political economy. Firstly, seeing as it “hinges on the material, institutional, and discursive organization of space, the imperial “remains open to non-territorial, networked forms of spatial order.”⁵⁵ This is crucial for a networks-based approach to imperial histories, which should seek to surpass the unproductive distinction between “formal” and “informal” empire while remaining attentive to the traction of state disciplinary mechanisms as major imperial tools. Secondly, through its attention to “relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation,” and

Phoenix: The Battle of Algiers, the Pacification of South Vietnam, and the Civil Wars of Central America – A Study of French-American Cold War Counterinsurgency Tactics and their Application in Guatemala,” (MA thesis, Geneva Graduate Institute, 2019, forthcoming).

53 For Blackwater’s imperial ties, see, for example, James Ridgeway, “The Secret History of Hurricane Katrina”, *Mother Jones*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2009/08/secret-history-hurricane-katrina/>.

54 Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1349.

55 Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1349-1350.

through its emphasis on power and scalar asymmetries, the imperial “foregrounds the analysis of power and politics on a global scale” and is therefore attuned to the referential force of the political-economic.⁵⁶ It thus also points towards political economy as a critical anchor for histories of empire.

Moreover, the category of “the imperial” is attentive to the large-scale, non-national, and non-state-centric dimensions of empires. Concurrently, it renders former imperial ties cognitively salient again, thus dealing with the issues raised by Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan previously mentioned in chapter 2 of this essay. Furthermore, in that it foregrounds the analysis of power and politics, “the imperial” addresses the depoliticizing tendencies that, through its genealogy, Stoler and McGranahan’s concept of “imperial formation” risks carrying. It also goes beyond it in that it does not name an object, which the term of “formation” would instinctively imply. Indeed, “the imperial” is “not a kind of entity,” but a sensitivity, a “way of seeing,” a concept that serves to shed light on a topic through the application of an optic.⁵⁷ In this sense, the imperial is better suited at avoiding reification than the “imperial formation.”

Historians could argue that a shift to “the imperial” might risk turning the category into a catchphrase that sees every

power asymmetry as imperial, thus sacrificing analytical precision on moral and rhetorical grounds. Two counterarguments: firstly, this objection would be more convincing if historians of modernity were more inclined to take account of the profound commensurability between empire and modernity. They should not shy away from remaining attentive to the imperial relations that often lie dormant beneath their subjects of analysis. Secondly, Kramer’s definition of “the imperial” has the benefit of being precise and constructive. Its relevance, however, will hinge on historians’ ability to apply it with rigour and nuance, while avoiding the generalizing tendencies that plague other literatures.⁵⁸ More importantly, the relevance of “the imperial” will ultimately rest on their ability to confront our general inclination towards naturalization and reification. When applied rigorously as a *concept*, “the imperial” should dissolve itself after analysis – after having served to construct an object. Lest we end up mistaking the object for the concept, this is how we should make use of “the imperial.” Finally, it must be stated that “the imperial is defined by its effects,” it therefore understands imperial practices “through [their] consequences, intended or not.”⁵⁹ If historians’ desire is to investigate degrees of intentionality, they should resort to ethnography and anthropology of

56 Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1391.

57 Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1350.

58 See, for example, Aijaz Ahmad, “Imperialism of Our Time,” *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 43-62.

59 Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1350.

state, as well as non-state, actors.⁶⁰ These disciplines have developed methods calibrated to pinpoint the meanings of human practices embedded in these contexts. Drawing from them, historians will contribute to more fine-grained analyses of the ontologies of imperial actors. Moreover, in analysing the embeddedness of state and non-state actors in imperial contexts, historians could make good use of Michael Cowen's concept of "straddling", which highlights actors' variable positions of power and accumulation, covering economic, political, as well as cultural spheres. What these disciplines and concepts have in common is their emphasis on the relational aspect of imperial power.

A networks-based perspective, a political-economic anchor, and methods from anthropology of state and of institutions are all tools from which global history could draw. Their common trait is that they all emphasize the *relationality* of imperial power. Exploring "the imperial" as an analytical fulcrum thus bears the promise of shedding light not only on formerly unseen practices, discourses, and trajectories, but also on their eminently political significance for our present. As a final comment, it must be said that this conceptual turn to "the imperial" would allow

for a much-needed shift in debates in global history. From a focus on the question of the nature of empires (formal/informal; national/international), historians would turn to a focus on the question of the objects of global and imperial histories. The issue would then be: which archives can global and imperial histories trace when using "the imperial"? What are, for example, the consequences of seeing the Dutch Golden Age from an imperial perspective instead of a national or Eurocentric one?⁶¹ In other words, which forms of historical unthinking can "the imperial" unravel? Conversely, this shift in focus to the "objects" of global history would spur important debates concerning the limits of the field: where do global history's blind spots lie? What does an imperial optic in global histories unearth, and what does it obscure? In other words, where does the *unthought* of global history itself, lie? This back-and forth between the objects and concepts of global history is essential to defining its scope and limits. It is under the banner of these final interrogations that a global history may, for the moment, ride.

60 See, for example, Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Vetter, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (eds), *Stategraphy. Toward a Relational Anthropology of the State* (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

61 See, for example, Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987) and the critique by Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4, (2000), 823-824.