Transimperial

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Long before the term 'transimperial' came into use, postcolonial (→ **Postcolonial**) studies, new imperial history, and global history already gave fascinating insights into the omnipresence and 'everydayness' of the human experience of empires. However, the majority of more recent historical work on empires has made use of one particular approach. Many studies have adopted the idea, postulated by Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, of bringing the colonizer and the colonized, the centre and the periphery 'into one analytic field'. (Cooper and Stoler 1997, 15) This has provided us with thrilling insights, but it has also had an unintended side effect: The research has tended to focus on intra-imperial processes and single nation-empires. As transnational and global history have deconstructed the nation and pointed to its fluid boundaries, the colonies have often served as an analytical means of doing so. However, the history of empires beyond the nation, in turn, has remained remarkably neglected for quite a long time as similar approaches were not used systematically to transcend the (nation-)empires' boundaries. The paradoxical effect has been that empires have often ended up being nationalized. And this is the point at which transimperial history (TIH) intervenes. Simply put, transimperial history aims to bring different empires together in one analytical field by connecting metropoles or colonies belonging to distinct empires.

Transimperial histories, therefore, emphasize connections that go beyond national, colonial, and imperial boundaries, exploring areas that do not neatly align with nation-empire borders. (Potter and Saha 2015, 24) By bringing different empires together, this approach also highlights shared histories that were previously disconnected. Therefore, all possible forms of connectivity have always been central to TIH. Or in other words, without connections, interaction, and mobility (→ **Im/mobility**), there is no transimperiality. It is precisely for this reason that it is valuable to systematically relate the concept of dis:connectivity to TIH. This endeavour will help us complement, enrich, and, simultaneously, critically evaluate our notions of imperial connections, which drive TIH. The following thus explores, firstly, how TIH can benefit from the methodological approach of dis:connectivity. It then turns the tables and asks how the concept of dis:connectivity could profit from the perspective of TIH with its focus on shared imperial histories.

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Dis:connectivity in transimperial history

If the keyword most closely associated with global history is 'connections' (Conrad 2016, 64), the same could be said about transimperial history. Therefore, the emphasis on connections alone is not enough to explain the uniqueness of the approach. It has thus been suggested that two additional Cs be introduced into the equation: competition and cooperation.[1] These two have long been integral to empire studies. However, in order to revitalize empire studies methodologically, transimperial history examines colonial competition, cooperation, and connectivity not as separate phenomena but as linked processes. The point is not to isolate cooperation or competition analytically but to shed light on how they reinforced each other and how connectivity plays into this. Additionally, TIH cannot provide a universal theory of connectivity between imperial formations. Nor does it aim to make broad statements detached from specific historical settings about the nature and interplay of cooperation and competition among empires. Instead, the systematic adoption of the approach allows us to identify the extent, density, and diversity of connections between empires at a particular moment in time.

Empires were always connected to other empires, whether on the level of knowledge production, material connections, or through politics of comparison. However, more than proof of connectivity is needed to make a convincing transimperial history. And despite the importance of connections, there has always been one danger: the risk of overemphasizing connectivity. In TIH, a variety of related terms – such as flows, networks (→ **Networks**), entanglements, links, and exchanges – have been utilized to convey the idea of everything being connected (Kamissek and Kreienbaum 2016). One may thus wonder if, as in global history, TIH has also been complicit in overemphasizing connectedness. Although not always the case, there have been instances where it is challenging to deny this claim. One notable example is the focus on travelling actors and their transimperial mobility. Criticism has been directed at how sometimes such narratives have been used to 'create images of "faceless globetrotters" brought back to life to elucidate global connections' (Shapiro 2021, 574).

Transimperial history's bias against all things entangled meant that it neglected most things that interfered with or interrupted (→ **Interruptions**) colonial connections. As a result, discussions of disconnections were rare in transimperial history. There have been a few exceptions: Already in 2005, David Lambert and Alan Lester argued that 'tracing trans-imperial networks [...] goes beyond comparison

1 Hedinger and Heé 2018. What follows is partly taken from this contribution. It was supplemented with new considerations made while writing a book-length introduction to the topic (Hedinger, Heé, and Mizutani forthcoming).

and looks for actual historical connections and disconnections between different sites of empire' (Lambert and Lester 2006, 30). More recently, there has been a call to balance the 'recent overdose' of connectivity by considering interruption, disconnection, and boundaries within a transimperial approach (Hedinger and Heé 2018, 445). However, apart from such programmatic and general statements, there seems to be little empirical focus on disconnections in TIH to date. Nonetheless, with the current crisis of globalisation, there is a growing interest in systematically including the notion of disconnection in TIH. Maritime history and the transimperial Pacific are some areas where these discussions are now emerging (Heé 2024).

If we agree that transimperial history mainly focuses on the interconnected histories of empires while neglecting interruptions or the limitations of those connections, it is evident that TIH could benefit greatly from turning to the concept of dis:connectivity. The questions then are: Which aspects of the concept could be incorporated into TIH research practices? And in what way would TIH benefit from this? First of all, the notion of dis:connectivity offers a whole set of instruments to understand different forms of interruptions. By discussing detours (→ **Detours**), delays, obstruction, resistance, etc., a myriad of topics can be addressed from a transimperial perspective. For disconnections, too, it is not about developing a general theory of how this phenomenon works under colonial conditions, but rather about looking at concrete imperial settings. Furthermore, the consideration of different forms of disconnection gives us the methodological instruments to reflect systematically on a phenomenon not yet addressed in TIH. Rather than solely celebrating connections, the focus would thus shift to processes that interrupt, restrict, and control transimperial flows. Dis:connectivity highlights the interplay between connections and disconnections. Hence, by generating new knowledge on different forms of transimperial interruptions, we could then finally turn to discussing such interplays.

Transimperial disconnections can manifest in various ways. They may concern spaces, actors, and/or chronologies. For example, in the case of spaces, the concept is relevant when examining regions like the Mediterranean. Horden and Purcell's well-known historical work, *The Corrupting Sea*, which led to a surge in Mediterranean scholarship from the early 2000s onwards, stressed the idea of Mediterranean connectedness (Horden and Purcell 2000). However, it has faced criticism for 'an overemphasis on connectivity' (Rommel and Viscomi 2022, 15). The notion of dis:connectivity has the potential to reveal unexplored or previously overlooked aspects by encouraging us to look beyond contact zones and exchanges. Exploring stories depicting the transimperial nature of the Mediterranean and, simultaneously, the disruptions it experienced across different periods and areas could offer new insights into the region's history.

If we turn to transimperial actors, anti-colonial activists come to mind. In this context, transimperial history could pay more attention to power imbalances that restricted interaction and connection among colonial subjects. One might, for example, discuss how regimes attempted to disrupt connections, often through violent means, establishing and enforcing new boundaries. On the other hand, anti-colonial activists from Africa, India, the Near East, and the Caribbean formed global solidarities in their fight against colonialism. However, despite sharing a belief system and worldview, they were also often disconnected by territory, language, and culture (Gani 2022, 56). As such examples show, it may be more productive to 'disaggregate the elements of global connection and disconnection' rather than sticking to a binary understanding of both processes (Tworek 2023, 13). And this is precisely what the concept of dis:connectivity advocates.

It also becomes apparent how connections and disconnections are mutually constitutive and interwoven if we discuss transimperial periodizations. One challenging topic here is the global interwar period and the links between late 19th-century colonialism and the two world wars. By applying the concept of dis:connectivity, the complex interplay of deglobalisation and globalisation processes in the interwar world can then be addressed in a more sophisticated way. For instance, fascism can be understood as an anti-globalisation movement that gained traction globally during the 1930s. All over the world, the rise of fascist movements was often fuelled by disrupting economic connections, a phenomenon fascist regimes later even intensified through their *Großraum* and autarky politics. However, the shared history of the Axis powers also reveals their efforts to create global political connections. On a global scale, fascist radicalization was often driven by transimperial connections and competition rather than transnational ones (Hedinger 2017; Hedinger 2021). And in this context, it is important to note that the increase in interactions between fascist intermediaries in Europe and Asia did not always result in greater connectivity. Instead, ongoing competition, which produced interruptions and sustained distances between Asian and European fascist brokers, was also crucial for and characteristic of global fascism. These are only a few of the issues that may be addressed by combining a transimperial perspective with the concept of dis:connectivity.

Dis:connectivity beyond the global

However, the concept of dis:connectivity can also profit from a transimperial perspective. The notion of dis:connectivity is intimately linked to 'the global'. In TIH, on the other hand, not all connections need to be played out on a global scale, as numerous imperial formations and interactions occurred below and beyond the global level. Besides, not all transimperial exchanges had global aims or conse-

quences (Barth and Cvetkovski 2015). A transimperial perspective may thus instead highlight a wide range of different spatial configurations, which then can be discussed beyond the mere question of global dis:connectivity. This can include imperial hubs, nodes, or regions that were all geographically rather limited in scale. Attention then turns to micro-regional frameworks, which were, at the same time, part and parcel of broader imperial settings. (See here and below Mulich 2020)

One example of a transimperial microregion can be found in the Caribbean islands. There, specific forms of transimperial dis:connectivities become visible: enslaved people and sailors, magistrates and merchants alike all lived in a world of border-crossings and transimperial connectivity but were, at the same time, separated by race and colonial hierarchies. Discussing microregions' dis:connections from a transimperial perspective may open new questions, topics, and narratives. Global microhistory has, without doubt, for quite a while, addressed the question of how the local is connected to the global. However, the nodes between the local and global diverge from the nodes between the microregion and the transimperial. Thus, connections, spaces, and scales may look very different from a transimperial perspective. Therefore, TIH could usefully rethink the nature and scale of dis:connection by playing the *jeux d'echelles* in new ways. The outcome may be histories that are 'more than imperial, but less than global' (Potter and Saha 2015).

Furthermore, global history has earned the reputation of telling its cosmopolitan narrative as a kind of naturalized success story, thereby glossing over issues such as war, violence, oppression, and exploitation. (For a broader discussion, see Drayton and Motadel 2018) Such objections are not always justified: Given the crisis of globalisation processes lately, global historians have also thought more about disconnections (Wenzlhuemer et al. 2023). However, although the global is, generally speaking, positively connoted, the imperial is certainly not. Empires are inherently built upon their inhabitants' legal, social, or racial inequalities. In many ways, TIH is thus more attuned to power imbalances and social, racial, and economic hierarchies than global history was and is. Applying a transimperial perspective may further help to provide grassroots perspectives, amplify Indigenous voices, and give more attention to subaltern actors. THI can address the interrupting qualities of such asymmetric power relations. In this sense, it is crucial to ask what empires do to dis:connections. In short, what transimperial history may cover less in a geographical sense than global history, it makes up for by becoming analytically sharper.

Writing history requires drawing boundaries. Transimperial history is no exception to this. Just as in every other subfield, these boundaries concern the choice of spaces, temporalities, and actors. Transimperial history is closely related to imperial and global history. However, it is distinct from the focus on nation-empires, which is still the most common approach in imperial studies, and from the

planetary scope of some global histories. Transimperial history instead systematically combines the premises of transnational and global history with the critical political potential of postcolonial studies and new imperial history. At its best, transimperial histories can thus draw the boundaries in terms of space, temporality, and actors in a very different way. By so doing, it redefines these boundaries and sets new parameters. Concerning conventional chronologies, the approach may, for example, help overcome the division between the so-called (European) modern and early modern periods. In this sense, transimperial history is not just a subdiscipline or a complementary feature but an approach and method in its own right.

Today, we are witnessing a crisis of democratic liberalism, as well as the return of imperial wars of conquest. This newly perceived fragility of the global has fundamentally altered our notions of processes of globalisation, global connectivity, and geopolitical world orders. Given such crises, studying the history of nation-empires in isolation is no longer a real option. Neither is it appropriate to write the twisted history of empires by focusing solely on a few Western examples, such as the British or the French. In this context, transimperial history, first and foremost, challenges the privileged link between nations and their empires, thereby complicating any depiction of imperial history as one nation's special path to one empire. At the same time, by focusing on spaces in between empires, transimperial history challenges not only nationalized but also the remaining Eurocentric perspectives in historiography.

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