

SURVEY AND SPECULATION

SPECIAL ISSUE: EMPIRE AND CITIES

Empire and Cities: Introduction

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Abstract

This introduction to the ‘Survey and Speculation’ special issue ‘Empire and Cities’ outlines how this collection came about, summarizes the six contributions and draws general conclusions.

The roots of this special issue lie in a seminar series the Global Urban History Project (GUHP) working group ‘Cities, Empires, and Their Discontents’ organized in 2021–23. Involving dozens of junior and senior scholars, the seminars were held online. Early on, COVID was still structuring everyday life for many of us; and at any rate participants were spread around the world. When *Urban History* announced a celebratory fiftieth anniversary conference in Leicester in summer 2023, some of the working group members put together a panel. We wanted to get to know each other in person, and to advertise our work beyond GUHP.

The studies that the Leicester conference participants discussed – six of which are united here – have a considerable thematic and geographic range that mirrors the breadth of the field ‘empires and cities’ itself. In turn, this breadth puts a spotlight on a crucial fact certainly about the modern period, covered by five of the six surveys here, but also about the early modern period, covered by one text. To a considerable degree during the early modern period and in particular during the roughly 150 years of the modern period – from the *Sattelzeit* (the last third of the eighteenth century to the first third of the nineteenth century) to the 1950s – the world was dominated by empires.¹ Despite differences,²

¹Both the United States and the Soviet Union were what can be called ‘international empires’. They ‘achieve[d] imperial ends’ importantly though not exclusively ‘by working through the states of others’ and, especially in Washington’s case, through international organizations. Quotes: P. Kramer, ‘Power and connection: imperial histories of the United States in the world’, *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), 1348–91, at 1366 (he reserves the term for the USA).

²Some were more sea-based, others more land-based, and their ‘repertoire’ of rule varied in time and shifted across time. Quote: J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010), 16.

they shared common traits and had ‘a family resemblance’,³ central to which were open and often institutionalized hierarchies and inequalities. It is the number of members in this imperial ‘family’, the different but increasingly interacting ways of exercising power and imperial subjects’ various ways of tackling this situation – within ‘their’ empire and sometimes across empires – that explains the range of the texts united here.

This last point is also the first of three inter-related take-aways of this ‘Survey and Speculation’ section taken as a whole. The second, more fundamental one is that precisely because empires were such dominant polities in much of the modern period as well as before, global urban historians need to pay more attention to them – even in cases where they may not be that self-evident. (The US example, by Cyrus Schayegh, is a case in point.) And last, the manifest inequalities and hierarchies of empire, and the multiple forms of power underlying them, are visible in matters both small – e.g. in neighbourhoods – and very large – e.g. in city hierarchies – in global histories of cities that take empires seriously.⁴

What, then, are our six texts? They begin with ‘On the fringes of empire? Rethinking suburbs as colonial spaces in early modern South and Southeast Asia’, by Dries Lyna, which brings the literature on modern suburbs to bear on early modern European-led cities in Asia. With a focus on the Dutch, the text argues that greater attention to peri-urban areas and their varied Asian populations is critical for pushing beyond persistent Euro-centric (and, here, Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie-centric) understandings of how those cities were formed, functioned, what they felt and looked like.

‘Toward a Japanese paradigm of settler-colonial urbanism?’, by Michael Thornton, uses the case of Sapporo, the largest city on what is now the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, to qualify dominant US/Anglo-centric models of settler-colonial cities. Certainly, Sapporo evinced parallels with Anglo/US cases, and US specialists had a hand in shaping it. But there were differences, a central one being the effects of long-standing Ainu–Japanese relations on Sapporo’s construction and functioning from the 1800s onwards.

‘The multi-imperial dimensions in treaty-port Tianjin and its historiographical significance’, by Taoyu Yang, uses the case of Tianjin, a northern Chinese port city that in the 1860s–1940s saw nine foreign concessions and multiple Chinese municipalities, to push beyond single-empire urban studies. The text takes a closer look at multi-imperial urban histories and foregrounds the complexities shaping the colonial experiences of all imperialist powers as well as that of the Chinese in Tianjin.

‘International zones in global urban history’, by Anna Ross, concerns cities that, having belonged to various Eurasian land empires, came under League of Nations management after World War I. Extant scholarship of those international cities has focused on the identities and functions of League officials. By contrast, this text foregrounds local societal actors, especially economically successful ones. It shows how many brought their late imperial standing to bear on their cities during League

³Quote: P. Duara, ‘Empire and imperialism’, in *idem et al.* (eds.), *A Companion to Global Historical Thought* (Chichester, 2014), 384. Empires did not just seek to extract profits but also rule politically, usually from a metropolitan centre; they made universalistic claims; they were spatially expansive; they contained heterogeneous peoples and spaces; and they treated those peoples and spaces unequally.

⁴I would like to thank one of the two reviewers of this special issue for having pointed me in the right direction regarding the overall take-away of our six texts.

management, and used their ‘international League status’ to increase their wealth and – sometimes with foreign businessmen – create durable investment patterns.

‘Enfolding empire into 1930s London: the India Round Table Conference’, by Stephen Legg, pushes the boundaries of the literature on imperial metropolises. It shows what could happen when not ‘just’ subaltern colonials but a critical mass of influential colonial players – here, dozens of members of India’s political elite – lived, however impermanently, in an imperial metropolis. Among other developments, their stay shifted their own views of the metropole; and their visibility influenced how Britons perceived them socially, culturally and ultimately politically.

Finally, ‘Were post-colonial cities US imperial cities?’, by Cyrus Schayegh, proposes a US imperial research perspective on post-World War II post-colonial cities, i.e. cities that the United States did *not* colonially occupy. The text does not posit a new city type. Rather, using Beirut as its case, it argues that powerful US government and corporate imperial actors and interests helped shape such cities, and in turn were shaped by the peoples and structures in these localities. Moreover, the US example buttresses the emerging view, regarding formal empires as well, that it may make more sense to use ‘the imperial urban’ as a research *perspective* rather than operate with an imperial city *type*.

Let me end with a word on format. We authors thought that *Urban History*’s ‘Survey and Speculation’ format is a perfect platform to present our work, and thank the journal for its interest and support in publishing this collection. We believe this format is well served by texts that are brief – in most of cases, around 2,000 words – and that leverage an illustrative empirical case for a conceptual intervention in their respective historiographic field.