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VIEWPOINT

Threads, Entanglements, and the Work of Empire

Tony Ballantyne

History Programme, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand
Email: tony.ballantyne@otago.ac.nz

Abstract

This response to "Horizontal Threads: Towards an Entangled Spatial History of the Romanov Empire," reflects on shifting approaches to the structure of empires and the power of entanglement as an analytical tool for making sense of the incorporationist work of empire.

Keywords: empire; mobility; entanglement

In "Horizontal Threads" Catherine Gibson and Anton Kotenko think up from some very specific examples of intra-regional imperial ties to explore the possibilities of what they describe as an "entangled spatial history" of the Romanov empire. This approach, they suggest, allows us to see the "multidirectional 'warp and woof' weaving the fabric of imperial society." One of the powerful dimensions of this article is that the mode of analysis it proposes and models is grounded in archival work emerging out of the "unremarkable archival files" that are such a common part of the research experience of historians. Many of us have worked through files, trying to make sense of their contents, to place them in context, to judge the significance of the abundant and sometimes perplexing details they offer or, in other cases, trying to decipher the significance of their terse or even fragmentary character. Their essay is a reminder of the power of archives as sites that not only immerse historians in the messy granularity of past lives, but also their capacity to capture historians' imaginations and to spur the formulation of larger interpretative models. But as a co-authored work triggered by an unplanned discussion on the margins of a scholarly gathering, it also embodies the potential for conversation, comparison, and collaboration to generate significant new insights.

My own work on imperial networks and forms of mobility within the British empire in the long-nineteenth century has frequently returned to the analytical metaphor of the empire as a web-like structure. This was a model that emerged out of the archive, too, as I literally mapped the forms of mobility and exchange that threaded though the papers of a British tea-planter in Assam, Samuel Peal. From northeast India, Peal engaged with the ethnology of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, constructing an expansive correspondence network that reached across the world to enable his research.[1] This work depended on Peal's

[1] Tony Ballantyne, "Mr. Peal's Archive: Mobility and Exchange in Histories of Empire," in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, 2005), 87–110.

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ability to build "horizontal threads" of correspondence with ethnographers and officials in other British colonies. I was struck by the web-like nature of the rough working map of his correspondents that I had drawn while working through his files in the archive. From this starting point, I developed an analytical model that the recognized empire's structural dependence on both "horizontal" connections between colonies as well as "vertical connections" between the imperial center and various colonial sites. This model allowed us to see that empire "like webs, were both fragile, prone to crises where important threads are broken or structural nodes destroyed, yet also dynamic, being constantly remade and reconfigured through concerted thought and effort."[2]

In subsequent research, I demonstrated the ways in which colonized groups—such as Punjabi Sikhs—could both work within the web-like mesh of roads, railways, and steamer routes constructed by the British, while also fashioning their new and expansive familial and religious networks as they responded to the transformations of empire. As I discovered, these horizontal connections had shifting and complex relationships to imperial power; at times, they could be powerful bulwarks to British interests (as when Sikhs served as soldiers or policemen in a host of sites beyond their Punjab homeland), but in other contexts they could pose an explicit challenge to British paramountcy (as in the case of the revolutionary Ghadr movement). That work, which reconstructed Sikh cultural formations not just in Britain and India, but in Southeast Asia and Australasia, moved both mobility and entanglement to the center of my work, themes that continue to structure my writing.[3]

These questions now occupy prominent positions in the writing of British imperial history and given the strong historiographical sensibility of Gibson and Kotenko's essay, it might be useful to quickly sketch how these concerns emerged. The key first intellectual development was the emergence of a set of important works from the mid-1990s by feminist historians such as Antoinette Burton, Mrinalini Sinha, and Catherine Hall, which not only demonstrated the great power of gendered analysis but were also committed to reconnecting British metropolitan or "domestic" histories with the empire. These works treated Britain and colonies such as India or Jamaica in a single, connected analytical frame, recovering the two-way cultural traffic and rematerializing political asymmetries that structured empire.[4] These works, with their deep concern with culture, greatly enlarged our understandings of the operation of imperial power. Hard on their heels came a set of studies that moved explicitly to reading the empire as a set of networks or web-like connections, with historical geographers playing a prominent role in this wave of work.[5] Taken together, these currents have offered analytical models for culturally-inflected work on the empire subsequently, emphasizing the importance of colonial difference in the work of empire and in British society at home. The constitutive place of imperial connections in making British culture had been identified by earlier Black and South Asian British scholars, who

[2] Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke, 2002), 15.

[3] Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Durham, 2006), especially chapter 2.

[4] Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, 2002). Elements of this approach had been anticipated in the final chapter of Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1992).

[5] Two examples of historians work were Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race* and Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester, 2005). Key works by historical geographers include: Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London, 2001), and "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 4, no. 1 (January 2006): 124–41; Alan Lester and David Lambert eds, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006).

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emphasized the long history and importance of Africans and Asians in Britain, but these histories were routinely occluded or marginalized.[6] In the last decade, vital new clusters of work on slavery and its legacies and on the experience of non-white Britons has once again challenged the long association of Britain with whiteness. These arguments have often drawn anxious responses, feeding extended academic and political debate over the nature of Britishness and the shape of British history.[7]

Thus, the last generation of scholarship on the British empire has been interested in thinking about space, difference, and mobility. As Gibson and Kotenko note, previously the dominant tradition of British historical writing had imagined the empire more like a wheel than a web, with power and influence flowing out from the imperial center to the colonies. The new work on empire was much more attentive both to the movement of goods, people, and ideas from the colonies to the metropoles and to the horizontal forms of connections that linked colonies directly. There is an increasing body of scholarship that has shown how threads of connection were fashioned by indigenous and colonized peoples and the importance of modified and new forms of mobility in the shaping of their worlds.[8] Most importantly, however, I believe that this work—with its focus on power, difference, and mobility—has provided much richer insights into the routine operation of empire, how it was contested, disrupted, and reworked by colonized groups, and its transformative power than the older, more economistic approaches to empire that predominated in the 1980s and 90s. This work can be understood as a series of attempts to answer the kind of questions posed by Mark von Hagen in the Russian context, questions flagged by Gibson and Kotenko: how did the empire work? How did it change over time? How far did imperial power change things for various communities who were drawn into the empire?[9]

Gibson and Kotenko train our attention on the importance of connections and mobility. They map some of the ways in which historians have been revealing the centrality of motion and mobility in shaping life in Russia, while also highlighting the importance of the interplay between various forms of mobility with immobility and statis.[10] They point to the possibilities offered by urban histories to grapple with forms of connection generated by migration, municipal government, and print culture. They stress the "expansive spatial horizons of intra-imperial urban entanglements" and this seems a very fruitful line for future research. Of course, a work like William Cronon's landmark study of the symbiotic relationships between Chicago and its hinterland reminds us of the complex networks and movements of animals, people, commodities, forms of transportation, and money that shape urban centers: Cronon *Nature's Metropolis* directed us think about the "intricate systems" fashioned by, around, and between cities, and the ways in which these

[6] Most notably, Dilip Hiro, *Black British, White British* (London, 1971); Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars, and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700–1947* (London, 1986); Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London, 1987).

[7] Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, Eng., 2014); David Olusoga, *Black and British: a Forgotten History* (London, 2018); Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London, 2021).

[8] Jane Carey and Jane Lydon, eds, *Indigenous Networks: Mobility, Connections and Exchange* (New York, 2014); Rachel Standfield, ed., *Indigenous Mobilities: Across and Beyond the Antipodes* (Acton, Australia, 2018).

[9] Mark von Hagen, "Writing the History of Russia as Empire: The Perspective of Federalism," in Catherine Evtuhov and Boris Gasparov, eds., *Kazan, Moscow, St. Petersburg: Multiple Faces of the Russian Empire* (Moscow, 1997), 397.

[10] John Randolph and Eugene M. Avrutin, eds, *Russia in Motion: Cultures of Human Mobility since 1850* (Urbana, Illinois, 2012; Sylvia Sztern, *Russia on the Move: Railroads and the Exodus from Compulsory Collectivism, 1861–1914* (Cham, Switzerland, 2022); Anne Lounsbery, "The World on the Back of a Fish: Mobility, Immobility, and Economics in 'Oblomov,'" *The Russian Review* 70, no. 1 (January 2011): 43–64. A broader set of perspectives that include Russia is Róisín Healy, ed., *Mobility in the Russian, Central and East European Past* (London, 2019).

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radically reshaped nature, economic life, social relations, and cultural imaginations within the context of America's increasing domination of its west.[11]

Of course, when such systems developed in imperial spaces, they were shaped and scarred by power. Gibson and Kotenko are rightly wary of the risk that work on periphery-to-periphery connections might be seen as a "happy" or "positive" story; fears that are well-founded given the optimistic renderings of cross-cultural relationships that were common within "happy" readings of globalization (and its histories) in the 1990s. They stress that some forms of connectedness were "harmful," or "dark." Here I think we can see the real benefits of thinking about entanglements and the ability of this metaphor to illuminate the changing shape of social relationships in time and space. It can help us understand forms of interdependence and their enduring consequences, whether actors were preoccupied with these linkages or largely unaware of them, which was increasingly the case in societies that were more mobile and connected. Thinking through entanglement encourages us to assess the afterlives of connections, their abiding impact, or their faint traces.

Here Gibson and Kotenko stress "not all connections were equally benevolent for all persons involved." The "horizontal" threads that they direct our attention to operated within a wider set of complex power relations, relations often shaped by the inequalities of empire. One of the reasons my work has focused on the web-like structure of empire is that it reminds us of the concentrations of wealth, military resources, and power at the very center of the imperial formation and the ways in which these could condition the shape and impact of "horizontal" linkages between colonies. It is clear here that Gibson and Kotenko recognize that empires were incorporationist regimes. Of course, those processes of incorporation were uneven in their reach, impact, and consequences and were subject to contestation and resistance.[12] This incorporationist impulse, and the tensions it could provoke, are prominent concern in Charles Steinwedel's research and also in Karen Barkey's work on the Ottomans, both of which are cited by Gibson and Kotenko.[13] They point out Barkey's attachment to a "hub-and-spoke" model that focuses on center-periphery relationships, a model that is at odds with their emphasis on "horizonal threads."[14] But there are important elements in Barkey's work, including her vision of empires as "complex political formations that do not form one 'national' community but rather multiple networks of interaction" that remain very suggestive. And her work points clearly to the possibility of broader comparisons across time and space, which might bring the Ottoman and Romanov empires together, for example, or look back to other earlier models such the Roman or Byzantine empires.

The more immediate opportunity, however, is to explore the other such "horizontal threads" that this article trains our attention on and to use them to explore those questions posed by Mark von Hagen. And, perhaps, to follow those lines of connection to the points where they connect with other imperial systems or political orders in an age when empires were remaking the world.

Tony Ballantyne is a Distinguished Professor in History at the University of Otago in New Zealand. He has published widely on the cultural history of the British empire in the nineteenth century and British colonialism in India and New Zealand in particular. Thematically his work has focused on colonial knowledge, forms of mobility and understandings of cultural difference. He also has a long-running collaboration with Antoinette Burton, exploring the intersections between the history of empires and world history.

[11] William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1992), 384.

[12] Charles Steinwedel, *Threads of Empire: Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552–1917* (Bloomington, 2016), 8.

[13] Steinwedel, *Threads of Empire,* 8, 37–8, 65–7, 80, 248, 254; Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, Eng., 2008).

[14] Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, 10.

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