# Transformation at the Margins: Imperial Expansion and Systemic Change in World Politics

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**Abstract**

Taking the phenomenon of empire as its starting point, this article seeks to provide a framework for addressing the question of how and why international systems change over time. Synthesizing elements from network-relational analysis and practice theory, I argue that international systems are best thought of as being composed of multiple partially overlapping and interrelated hierarchical networks. These networks are made up of social ties - as in classic network analysis - but also of specific repertoires of practice. Systemic transformations happen through the reconfiguration of networks, both through shifts in social ties and through changes in their practices. Empire provides a particularly illuminating window into the topic of systemic change, in part because a major driver of historical transformations has been the expansion of empires and their encounters with other heterogeneous polities across the globe, and in part because a focus on imperial interactions highlights the limitations of existing unit-centric perspectives. Drawing on examples from the nineteenth century, I illustrate the usefulness of the framework by showing how different regionally anchored systems came into contact with the expanding spheres of Western empires and how such points of interaction contributed to the development of an increasingly global international system.

**Keywords**

Colonialism, empire, historical change, international systems, practice theory, relationalism

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**Biographical information**

Jeppe Mulich is an LSE Fellow in International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research focuses on the global dynamics of empire and colonial expansion, especially in the Atlantic world and in East and Southeast Asia. He has recently published articles in the *Journal of Global History* and *Political Power and Social Theory*.

Coherent, durable, self-propelling social units – monads – occupy a great deal of political theory but none of political reality.

- Charles Tilly[1]

To study colonization is to study the reorganization of space, the forging and unforging of linkages …

- Frederick Cooper[2]

How and why do international systems change over time? That is among the central questions facing scholars of world politics. Focusing on the phenomenon of empire, the present article seeks to provide a framework for addressing this topic by examining the elements constituting international systems and their variance across time and space.[3] My core

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[1] Charles Tilly, 'To Explain Political Processes', *American Journal of Sociology*, 100:6 (1995), p. 1596.

[2] Frederick Cooper, 'What is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian's Perspective', *African Affairs*, 100:399 (2001), p. 206.

[3] There are several problems with the term *international system*, both in a geographical sense (how far is the reach of the international exactly? How many international systems can coexist at any one time?) and as a matter of chronology (does the international require the existence of nations, and if so when and where do these emerge? Are they universal or historically anchored?). Despite these caveats I use the term international system throughout this article due to its prevalence and explanatory purchase in IR theory as well as its advantage over the alternative term *state system*, which places the emphasis on units rather than relations. See Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 17-34. For my full definition, see below.

argument is that the best way to approach the issue of systemic change is through a synthesis of two recent developments in IR theory, namely practice theory and relationalism. By thinking of international systems as the aggregate of numerous interrelated networks, and by examining the dynamics of these networks in detail, including the repertoires of practice that drive their interactions, we can more clearly see how systems are constituted and re-constituted over time, transforming the way world politics are conducted in the process.

Empire provides a particularly illuminating window into the topic of systemic change, in part because this form of political organization has dominated so much of human history and in part because it highlights some of the limitations of prevailing unit-centric theories of world politics. For centuries before the emergence of anything resembling the national-state of the twentieth century, empires were the prevalent mode of configuring polities, and inter-polity relations were, to a large extent, imperial relations. Over the past two decades the discipline of IR has begun to grapple seriously with the concept of empire and imperial expansion, producing a slew of works on the topic from a wide spectrum of theoretical perspectives.[4] Some of these works argue for seeing empires as particularly expansive units, not fundamentally different from other state types,[5] while others cast empires as distinct varieties of interpolity systems, qualitatively different from something like the national-state.[6]

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[4] Helge Jordheim and Iver Neumann, 'Empire, Imperialism and Conceptual History', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 19:3 (2011), pp. 153-6.

[5] See for example Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Charles Butcher and Ryan Griffiths, 'Between Eurocentrism and Babel: A Framework for the Analysis of States, State Systems, and International Orders', *International Studies Quarterly*, 61 (2017), pp. 328-36.

[6] See for example Daniel Nexon and Thomas Wright, 'What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate?', *American Political Science Review*, 101:2 (2007), pp. 253-71; Nexon, *The Struggle for*

My conceptualization aligns with the latter end of this spectrum, building on social-relational definitions of empire while expanding upon them by integrating the relational approach with a practice theoretical view of social ties and by placing the emphasis on points of interaction between rival empires and between imperial and other heterogeneous polities. Empires here are not seen as composed of a single discrete network, but are rather made up of multiple networks intersecting with or overlapping one another. In this sense, empires are best thought of as particular configurations of networks, often hierarchical, consisting of

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*Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires and International Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Paul MacDonald, *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundation for Peripheral Conflict in International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Morten Andersen, 'Semi-cores in Imperial Relations: The Cases of Scotland and Norway', *Review of International Studies*, 42:1 (2016), pp. 178-203. Beyond the literature discussed here a third approach to empire, exemplified by the works of a number of postcolonial and decolonial scholars, has focused on the ways in which empire and imperialism have informed the very notion of international relations and its academic study. While this approach has generated exceedingly valuable insights into the constitution, history and practices of the discipline of IR, what I am interested in here has more to do with the dynamics and the historical development of empires themselves than with the intellectual history and persistent legacy of their advocates and scholars. For examples of this work, see Robbie Shilliam (ed), *International Relations and Non-western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Sanjay Seth, 'Postcolonial Theory and the Critique of International Relations', *Millennium*, 40:1 (2011), pp. 167-83; John Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); J. Ann Tickner, 'Core, Periphery and (Neo)imperialist International Relations,' *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 627-46; Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

specific power relations and repertoires of practice. Moreover, these networks are not restricted to any single empire or polity, but often span multiple different political entities. This view is based on a definition of empire as being characterized by three traits in particular: the differentiation of and inequality among subject groups, a hierarchical relationship between different components of the empire, and an expansionist impulse towards territory and/or subjects.[7] This expansionist desire need not be currently acted upon but can be a thing of the recent past, meaning that empires in decline are still empires. Through the expansion or protraction of empires, networks are reconfigured, practices are altered and systemic change is ultimately brought about. I will return to a fuller discussion of this definition and the conceptual moves it requires later in the article.

It is important to point out that while the article focuses on empires and inter-imperial interactions for the reasons outlined above, the argument goes deeper than that. Empires are not the only polities that defy the categorization of well-bounded units and inter-imperial interactions are far from alone in cutting across nominal boundaries. In fact, no polities should be thought of as discreet entities existing apart from one another, but rather as particular configurations of networks with the potential to be reconfigured or reconstituted over time. Interactions do not take place in some space *between* these networks, but *within* them, sometimes with little regard to formalized boundary drawing. Empire is therefore used to illustrate the broader limitations of unit-centric conceptions of international systems and to show the value in refocusing our accounts of historical transformations around networks and practices.

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[7] This definition follows recent scholarship in history and sociology, including Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in world history: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 8-11 and Craig Calhoun et al, *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power* (New York: New Press 2006), p. 3.

Acknowledging the messiness, complexity and entanglement of historical world politics is the first step towards breaking down some of the persistent dichotomies of IR. Imperial incursions into the world did not lead to clear-cut binary configurations, but rather a complex web of hierarchical relations and diverse practices. Furthermore, colonialism and the threat of imperial expansion fostered adaptive strategies and politically novel polity formations across the globe. Understanding this process and conceptualizing international systems as consisting of multiple hierarchical networks allows us to better grasp the historical trajectory of world politics and to fundamentally reject overly simplistic and presentist binaries such as those of inside-outside, core-periphery and foreign-domestic, which still underpin the discipline.

The article proceeds in four steps. First I present a brief overview of existing accounts of empire within the international systems literature, focusing on the broadly unit-centric perspective and on the new relational approach. Second, I propose a reconceptualization of international systems in general and empires in particular, building on and expanding upon the social-relational approach in order to overcome some of the shortcomings I see in existing accounts. Third, I consider what this reconceptualization means for thinking about colonialism and imperial expansion as particular forces of historical change and generative adaptation. Finally, I illustrate my conceptual arguments by applying aspects of the analytical framework to three specific historical examples, drawn from the period of European overseas colonization. These historical illustrations show how different regionally anchored systems or polities came into contact with the expanding spheres of European empires and how these points of interaction at the apparent margins of empire each contributed to the increasingly global international system of the long nineteenth century.

## Units, relations and systems

Since the birth of the discipline, IR scholars have debated the nature of the international system. Recent scholarship has done much to shed light on and broaden this issue through the study of historical systems outside the traditional body of examples drawn from modern European history. Most arguments still concern similar topics, namely the definition of the units of which systems are composed (typically a more or less heterogeneous collection of state forms) and the relationship between these units (often simplified as being either anarchic or hierarchical). With the danger of doing violence to the complexity of the field, recent accounts can be divided into two broad categories: unit-centric approaches and relational approaches. These two approaches are necessarily stylized categories, and they share many of the same reference points and theoretical baggage. The particular body of work on which both of them draw is dominated by a number of second wave historical sociologists and historical IR scholars, including Charles Tilly whose scholarship provides a good example of the difference in perspective.[8] Unit centric accounts thus tend to reference Tilly's work on European state formation,[9] while relational accounts pair this work with

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[8] Other shared touchstones include Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,' *Millennium*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126-55; John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis,' *World Politics*, 35:2 (1983), pp. 261-85; Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, vol. 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to 1760 AD* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Fore overviews, see George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State-formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens and Ann Orloff (eds.), *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, Sociology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), especially pp. 1-72.

[9] Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

Tilly's later scholarship on process-oriented analysis and relational conceptions of social phenomena.[10] In the following section I discuss these two approaches, focusing specifically on their different explanations of empire in order to highlight their analytical strengths and shortcomings.

The first approach sees international systems as systems of *states* first and foremost, in order to make comparisons between different types of systems, to track the historical development of the state, or to draw parallels between present-day foreign policy challenges and great power rivalries of the past. This approach casts empires as a specific type of unit, often a historical variation of or precursor to the nation-state – essentially as a certain type of expansionist great power. Traditionally, this perspective has emphasized the rivalry between competing imperial states operating under anarchy, but in some newer accounts the emphasis is placed upon historical systems that either operate under different conditions than anarchy or that see empires interacting with other explicitly non-imperial units. In the former case, these empires are seen as little more than particularly expansive and expansionist states, and the approach does relatively little to challenge or interrogate the discipline's reliance on the nation-state as the default category of actor.[11] The latter view provides a more compelling account of historical variance, either by emphasizing the heterogeneity of systems in which

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[10] Tilly, 'To Explain Political Processes'; Tilly, 'Mechanisms in Political Processes,' *Annual Review of Political Science,* 4 (2001), pp. 21-42; Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2005).

[11] See for example Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Ernest Lefever, *America's Imperial Burden: Is the Past Prologue?* (Boulder: Westview, 1999).

unlike units coexist and interact with one another or by telling stories of systemic development and changes over time in the units making up these systems.[12]

While a case can be made for building on some of these more case sensitive unit-centric approaches by creating more historically informed typologies of state-forms in order to expand our horizons beyond the confines of the national-state, such a solution contains several problems.[13] Perhaps the major issue with relying solely on improving our current typologies is that it runs the risk of merely replacing one set of reductionist assumptions with a series of others, replicating a teleological view of historical developments and ignoring the central place of contingency in the rise of the national-state as the standardized political organization of world politics. A theoretical perspective focused on units too easily leads to a view of history as proceeding from one system of similar political actors to another, seeing history as a trajectory moving from feudal states to imperial states to nation-states, with states generally adapting to each other and transforming according to the best practices of a given

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[12] Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*; Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); William Wohlforth et al, 'Testing Balance-of-power Theory in World History', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:2 (2007), pp. 155-85; Alan Kwan, 'Hierarchy, Status and International Society: China and the Steppe Nomads', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:2 (2016), pp. 362-83.

[13] For a particularly interesting example of the development of such typologies, see Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach, *Polities: Authority, Identity, and Change* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

period.[14] It also lends itself too easily to Eurocentric explanations of historical developments, describing the spread of international norms and organizing principles as emanating outwards from Europe in a largely unilateral and monocausal fashion.[15]

Recent work by Charles Butcher and Ryan Griffiths provides one of the sharpest formulations of the unit-centric perspective, while at the same time explicitly rejecting Eurocentrism. The two authors present a framework through which to study diverse state systems and international orders including those dominated by empires, which they see as qualitatively similar to other state forms. In their words, "more particular forms of the state – such as empire, national-state, or city-state – do not differ qualitatively from one another. Rather, they vary primarily in terms of their structural differentiation."[16] They argue that hierarchy and anarchy delineate the boundaries of the state, casting intra-state interactions as hierarchical and inter-state interactions as anarchic. In this way, states-as-units are the fundamental building blocks of international systems: "The coercion-wielding, foreign-policymaking state is the lodestar for the study of systems and orders."[17] Butcher and Griffiths' account is specifically a critique of what they term "Babel" – the plurality of studies of specific regional or historical state systems, offering different concepts or

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[14] For the paradigmatic example of this type of analysis, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979).

[15] For a number of critiques that turn the Eurocentric view on its head, see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Shilliam, *International Relations and Non-western Thought*.

[16] Butcher and Griffiths, 'Between Eurocentrism and Babel', p. 334.

[17] Ibid.

terminologies to study each of them and thus making comparisons all the more difficult. Their argument, therefore, is essentially in favour of a more narrow definition of international systems in terms of their component parts – units – highlighting transhistorical commonalities between these, while acknowledging historical variance in the interaction capacity of different systems.[18] However, this reification of unit-centric frameworks and restatement of what is essentially a well-established definition of the state is hardly the only way to conduct broad comparative analyses of different historical and geographical systems. One does not need a modernized version of the Weberian state to achieve analytical transposability.

Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman provide another recent contribution to the literature on historical international systems with their account of the early modern Indian Ocean. As they point out, very different polity types have in fact always coexisted, interacted with, and even transformed each other through this interaction, but this has far from always happened in a fashion leading to mutual homogenization.[19] Phillips and Sharman present an interesting variation of the approach - they are explicitly interested in heterogeneous systems and they present a convincing historical corrective to state-centric accounts that argue for interaction leading to homogenization.[20] But they are still predominantly casting states as units, and as they add complexity and nuance to the conception of state forms they simultaneously reify

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[18] From Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 80.

[19] Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman, 'Explaining Durable Diversity in International Systems: State, Company, and Empire in the Indian Ocean', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:3 (2015), pp. 436-48; Phillips, 'Global IR Meets Global History: Sovereignty, Modernity and the International System's Expansion in the Indian Ocean Region', *International Studies Review*, 18:1 (2016), pp. 62-77.

[20] Phillips and Sharman, 'Explaining Durable Diversity', pp. 439-41.

the centrality of this unit in international systems.[21] Even accounts that emphasize such unit-level heterogeneity tend to fall short of adequately explaining the way in which empires operate in world politics. This is because imperial relations by their very nature involve spatial and political configurations that cannot be contained by the notion of well-bounded units. Imperial expansion and the spread of colonialism were in essence the negotiation, transformation and redrawing of boundaries, both territorial and political, fashioning new polities, blurring existing demarcations, and imposing altered hierarchical relations in the process. Any approach that regards empires primarily as states or state-like units fails to encapsulate the dynamics of this process, regardless of how sophisticated the typologies presented are. To put it differently, the hard distinction between inter-state anarchy and intra-state hierarchy makes little sense when considering the history of imperial expansion and colonial encounters.

This point leads to the second major approach to international systems and empire in IR – the social-relational perspective. This perspective tends to cast empire itself as a specific type of regional or international order or system, rather than as a discrete unit, emphasizing the relational nature of imperial ties.[22] Developed primarily by Daniel Nexon, this approach is

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[21] See also Jason Sharman, 'Sovereignty at the Extremes: Micro-states in World Politics', *Political Studies* 65:3 (2017), pp. 559-75.

[22] Nexon, *The Struggle for Power*; Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Daniel Nexon and Paul Musgrave, 'States of Empire: Liberal Ordering and Imperial Relations', in Tim Dunne and Trine Flockhart (eds), *Liberal World Orders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 211-30; Andersen, 'Semi-cores in Imperial Relations'.

placed within the wider body of relational IR scholarship.[23] Rather than envision the world as made up of discrete units and entities the relationalist perspective holds that what is important are the connections and transactions between these units, developing causal stories "by looking at configurations of processes."[24] Sociologist Mustafa Emirbayer puts the fundamental ontological dilemma as "whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static 'things' or in dynamic, unfolding relations."[25]

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[23] See in particular Tilly, 'To Explain Political Processes'; Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon, 'Relations before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), pp. 291-332; Stacie Goddard, 'Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimation', *International Organization*, 60:1 (2006), pp. 35-68; Charli Carpenter, 'Setting the Advocacy Agenda: Theorizing Issue Emergence and Nonemergence in Transnational Advocacy Networks', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51:1 (2007), pp. 99-120; Nexon, 'Relationalism and New Systems Theory', in Mathias Albert et al (eds), *New Systems Theories of World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 99-126; Jackson and Nexon, 'International Theory in a Post-paradigmatic Era: From Substantive Wagers to Scientific Ontologies', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 543-65; Edward Keene, 'International Hierarchy and the Origins of the Practice of Intervention', *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013), pp. 1077-90; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society', *International Organization*, 68:1 (2014), pp. 143-76; Julian Go and George Lawson (eds), *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[24] Jackson and Nexon, 'Relations before States', p. 306.

[25] Mustafa Emirbayer, 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 103:2 (1997), p. 281.

Instead of an attempt to collapse the differences between various units existing at the same time or fit them into fixed categories across periods, what this perspective provides is a way to examine first and foremost the *relations* within which these different units are embedded. By focusing on the positionalities of polities within hierarchical networks, the object of analysis becomes relations between units rather than the units themselves. Shifting the focus from unit-level state-centrism to the relational networks within which polities exist not only provides insights into the historical reality of world politics, but also breaks down some traditional dichotomies of the discipline –namely those of inside/outside, core/periphery, foreign/domestic and public/private.[26] If the primary types of interaction we are interested in in fact take place within, between, and across networked political configurations, then it makes little sense to talk about anything being inside or outside the "domestic sphere" or crossing over into some imagined "international sphere." As Julian Go has pointed out, the adoption of a relational approach carries important implications for the way in which we conceive of the seeming binary nature of the colonial and postcolonial worlds.[27] Approaching imperial configurations through a relational lens fundamentally destabilizes the idea that the metropolitan nations of the Occident and the colonial periphery of the Orient can somehow be seen as two discrete spheres. The binary between core and periphery, which allows

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[26] On the problems of differentiating between public and private violence in historical IR in particular, see Tarak Barkawi, 'State and Armed force in International Context', in Alejandro Colás and Bryan Mabee (eds), *Mercenaries, Pirates, Bandits and Empires: Private Violence in Historical Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 55-81 and Colás and Mabee 'Private Violence in Historical Context,' ibid., pp. 1-13, all arguing against the earlier account by Janice Thomson (Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)).

[27] Julian Go, 'For a Postcolonial Sociology,' *Theory and Society*, 42:1 (2013), pp. 41-3.

scholars to think of the diffusion of institutions and practices as taking place through a one-way conduit, relies on a substantialist view of the actors involved. Using the concepts of core-periphery, even in a strictly analytical sense, implicitly accepts the viewpoint of empire by designating parts of the globe as "peripheries" and parts as "cores," but as Go puts it, "in relational thought, there would be precious little allowance for metrocentrism."[28]

The relational perspective has proved especially apt at analysing empire because of the distinctive nature of imperial relations described above. Relationalism allows us to acknowledge at the same time the hierarchical nature of imperial order and the networked structure of empires. However, in its current form the approach possesses certain limits of its own and there is still much work to be done in mapping out how reconfigurations take place and thus cause changes to international systems. Two issues in particular stand out, one conceptual and the other empirical. Conceptually the network-relational literature on empire has yet to fully engage with the literature coming out of the practice turn, despite the shared theoretical space of the two perspectives.[29] This is a missed opportunity, since practice theory would contribute to a more fleshed-out account of the manifestation of social ties and provide network-relational accounts with a better apparatus to analyse change over time in world politics. A synthesis of the two frameworks would also go some way towards overcoming the conceptual instability and internal tension within network analysis, highlighted in recent critiques by Emily Erikson.[30] It would do so by moving further away from formal structuralism and foregrounding historical transformations and reconfigurations as central

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[28] Ibid., 42.

[29] See David McCourt, 'Practice Theory and Relationalism as the New Constructivism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 60:3 (2016), pp. 475-85

[30] Emily Erikson, 'Formalist and Relationalist Theory in Social Network Analysis', *Sociological Theory*, 31:3 (2013), pp. 219-42.

topics of study.[31] Empirically, relational accounts of empire in IR have tended to be overly focused on empires *as* systems rather than empires as *parts* of systems. This means that while much work has been done on the dynamics within imperial formations, less attention has been paid to interactions across and between empires. This matters a great deal, in part because it risks inadvertently adding to the starkly binary view of hierarchy and anarchy as taking place within and outside polities respectively, and in part because it misses some of the major sources of historical change in international systems dominated by rival empires. I will return to both of these issues below, after laying out the general contours of my proposed re-conceptualization.

**Re-conceptualizing empires and international systems**

Building on some of the accounts described above, I believe the best way to think of international systems is as follows: International systems and the activities taking place within them - that is to say world politics - are fundamentally composed of multiple partially overlapping and interrelated networks. These networks are not congruent with the polities or states which have traditionally been seen as making up the system (the "units"), since polities themselves are formed from particular configurations of networks. The networks are composed of *social ties* - as in classic network-relational analysis - but also of specific *practices* or *repertoires of practice*. As an example, early modern trading networks were made up of both the social ties between specific merchants and companies and of the

[31] For examples of similar moves in Sociology, see Peter Bearman and Emily Erikson, 'Malfeasance and the Foundations for Global Trade: The Structure of English Trade in the East Indies, 1601-1833', *American Journal of Sociology*, 112:1 (2006), pp. 195-230; Paul D. McLean and John F. Padgett, 'Organizational Invention and Elite Transformation: The Birth of Partnership Systems in Renaissance Florence', *American Journal of Sociology*, 111:5 (2006), pp. 1463-568.

commercial, social, legal, and cultural practices through which their interactions took place. Practices do not stand on their own but are bundled together in repertoires, representing the available actions, expected behavior, and cultural knowledge of groups in a given context.[32] These practices facilitate interactions, meaning that actors outside the networks can plug into them by learning and adopting their specific repertoires, becoming part of the networks on a temporary or permanent basis. In this sense networks are malleable and prone to expansion or protraction, and they are transformed both through shifts in social ties and through significant changes in their practices. [33]

It is crucial to note that power permeates the social ties that connect groups and individuals. This means that most if not all of the networks constituting an international system are fundamentally hierarchical. Whether this hierarchy is formal or informal, in a political-legal sense, depends on the specific repertoire of a given network. In other words, divided or layered sovereignty through formal colonization or annexation is different from influencing the foreign or trade policy of another polity (through something like "informal

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[32] Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978), p. 151. See also Tilly, 'Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758-1834', *Social Science History* 17:2 (1993), pp. 263-70.

[33] Nexon, *Struggle for Power*, pp. 24-7; Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1-48; Lauren Benton and Jeppe Mulich, 'The Space between Empires: Coastal and Insular Microregions in the Early Nineteenth-century World', in Paul Stock (ed), *The Uses of Space in Early Modern History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 151-71.

empire"), not because one involves hierarchical exertions of power and the other does not, but because these power relations are expressed through different repertoires of practice.[34]

Transformations in international systems thus happen through the reconfiguration of the networks composing these systems. Expansion or protraction of networks across space - political and geographical - is one example. Another example of systemic transformation is the change or replacement of a network's repertoires of practice. These two types of transformation often go hand-in-hand, as networks expand and incorporate new polities or regions, changing or adapting their practices in the process. In this way, a major driver of historical transformations has been the expansion of imperial polities and their encounters with other polities and other regional systems.

To restate and elucidate the above proposition and relate it more directly to the phenomenon of empire, allow me to unpack the two theoretical moves I am suggesting. The first is to more explicitly combine network-relational analysis with practice theory, creating an integrated approach that takes account of both relational configurations and the practices through which they are manifested. This is similar to David McCourt's argument that practice theory and relationalism are in fact closely linked theoretical perspectives, constituting the two sides of what he terms "the new constructivism."[35] The concept of practice used here mainly follows the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu[36] and draws on aspects of the

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[34] John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *The Economic History Review*, 6:1 (1953), pp. 1-15. See also Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 133-65.

[35] McCourt, 'Practice Theory and Relationalism', pp. 475-85. McCourt also highlights a number of practice-relational approaches, including field theory, discussed in further detail below.

[36] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); George Steinmetz, 'Bourdieu, Historicity, and Historical Sociology', *Cultural Sociology*, 5:1 (2011),

recent practice turn in IR.[37] Practices are exceedingly important as vehicles for forging connections and defining positionalities within networks. In this sense practice analysis is especially relevant as an analytical tool for the study of colonialism and imperial expansion, since colonial empires were to a great extent made up of relatively decentralized networks with little overarching policy or strategy dictating their actions. Shared practices were thus important on at least two levels – first in an intra-imperial context, as drivers of imperial projects in lieu of a centralized grand strategy; and second on the inter-imperial level, fostering modes of political interaction between empires, whether these took place at the level of metropolitan treaty negotiations or in the day-to-day contact zones of intercolonial borderlands and frontier regions.

Practices such as these, similar to what Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have labelled "imperial repertoires," are especially crucial in differentiating imperial polities across time and space.[38] While some practices are shared between most empires, others vary widely, situated as they are in the particular cultural, political, or geographic context of the empire in question. The Mongol Empire, as an example, looked quite different from most other Asian empires, combining a remarkable protection of cultural and religious diversity within the

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pp. 45-66; Philip Gorski (ed), *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[37] See especially Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International Practices: Introduction and Framework', in Adler and Pouliot (eds), *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 3-35; Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, 'Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:4 (2014), pp. 889-911.

[38] Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, pp. 3-6.

empire with the threat of extensive violence, bordering on complete destruction, for polities on the verge of conquest, carried out by a roaming nomadic elite.[39] In contrast, the Spanish Empire of the early modern period depended on the practice of converting new subjects to achieve a certain level of religious, if not cultural, unity, and relied primarily on local intermediaries for large territorial conquest in the Americas, as seen by the way in which Maya polities were effectively conquered by central Mexican, or Aztec, forces rather than by Spanish conquistadors themselves.[40] Thus, while empire as a mode of organizing political power and authority has been constant throughout much of world history, the practices through which empires operated have varied considerably and are worth analysing in order to understand the specific dynamics of any given empire or period, as well as changes in these over time.

The focus on common practices shares theoretical space with another framework for studying empire – Julian Go's global field theory. In his broad comparative account of British

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[39] Ibid., pp. 31-63; Joseph Fletcher, 'The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 46:1 (1986), pp. 11-50; Thomas Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism: The Policies of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia, and the Islamic lands, 1251-1259* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). It should be pointed out that, while starkly different from East Asian empires, there were important precedents for some of the Mongol practices in earlier steppe empires, including that of the Uighurs. See Michal Biran, 'The Mongol Transformation: From the Steppe to Eurasian Empire', *Medieval Encounters*, 10:1-3 (2004), pp. 341-3; Iver Neumann and Einar Wigen, 'The Importance of the Eurasian Steppe to the Study of International Relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 16:3 (2013), pp. 311-30.

[40] Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

and American empires, Go argues that empires are best though of as "located in wider global fields of conflict and competition as they reach across, through, and down to more localized settings of power relations. Embedded in and moving about these fields and power relations, empires are in turn shaped by them."[41] Go focuses on what he terms the hegemonic phases, or life cycles, of imperial formations, as their relative rise or decline forces them towards different strategies of expansion and competition.[42] Fields are different from networks, however, and while both emphasize the importance of positionality, fields are more abstracted and macro-level analytical constructs.[43] While field theory is good at highlighting continuity, it lacks a more granular theory of change over time, especially when it comes to explaining shifts in the practices dominating specific fields. In this sense, pairing a focus on repertoires of practice with the specificity and emphasis on interaction provided by network analysis offers a more fine-grained explanatory framework for understanding historical change. It also allows us to focus less on specific polities and more on the networks that cut across these political entities, further decentralizing the unit as the primary object of study.

The second theoretical move I propose is to focus more directly on the interaction *between* and *across* those networked configurations that constitute individual polities. The relational approach to empire has so far not been particularly adept at handling situations in which the empire being studied is not conterminous with the system itself. In other words, empires are typically cast as a certain type of international system along the lines of other ideal-typical systems, like hegemonic or multipolar ones, which fails to account for what happens at the aggregate level when multiple empires exist in competition with one another.

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[41] Go, *Patterns of Empire*, pp. 240-1.

[42] Ibid., 19-27, 166-205.

[43] See also John Levi Martin, 'What is Field Theory?', *American Journal of Sociology*, 109:1 (2003), pp. 1-49.

Studies at this level of inter-imperial rivalry tend not to see empires as networked configurations, despite a commitment to a relational framework, but rather slip back into the view of them as a distinct type of large state-unit. While this issue no doubt partly stems from authors using the names of political communities – states and empires – as shorthand when presenting empirical cases, there is an underlying tendency to think of such communities as bounded and separable units with relatively little interaction of the sort we are interested in happening *across* boundaries, even when acknowledging the networked nature of international systems.

This is particularly problematic since colonial overseas empires – arguably the most important type of empire over the past five hundred years - always existed in relationship to other empires. Moreover, they did not solely or even predominantly exist in a state of discrete rivalry, similar to that proposed by many advocates of the empires-as-states perspective, but rather in a messy state of entanglement, competition, and cooperation.[44] The relations between empires at any given time were not uniform across all levels of interaction, but quite often varied dramatically between different points of connectivity, leading to one perspective at the metropolitan level and quite different ones in the various colonial borderlands spread across the globe.

Even sophisticated relational accounts of empire that are explicitly focused on social ties below the systemic level, including the work of Paul MacDonald, have mostly limited their analysis to interactions within a single empire or between an empire and non-imperial polities during the process of conquest, in effect reproducing at least partially the centre-periphery

[44] Eliga Gould, 'Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery', *American Historical Review*, 112:3 (2007), pp. 764-86; Christian Koot, *Empire at the Periphery: British Colonists, Anglo-Dutch Trade, and the Development of the British Atlantic, 1621-1713* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); Benton and Mulich, 'The Space between Empires'.

dynamic of the more systemic approaches mentioned above.[45] In order to appreciate the dynamics of situations with multiple imperial polities competing and cooperating over territory and influence, it is important to cast empire not as a single networked system, such as the typical hub-and-spoke model, but rather as a number of different partially-overlapping networks operating with varying centres of gravity.

As mentioned above the networks in which social and political interactions are embedded are rarely based on positional equality between actors, but more often build upon relations of power and hierarchical ordering. This is no less true for imperial configurations than for other polities, given the layered and uneven sovereignty of empire.[46] Indeed, this emphasis of hierarchy is one of the key insights of the relational approach to imperial systems. However, hierarchies are not restricted to the domain of intra-imperial politics. Multiple hierarchies often overlap, embedding polities within different networks and prescribing them different roles dependent on their positionality within each. The factors determining positionality

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[45] MacDonald, *Networks of Domination*, especially pp. 46-77. Some of the territories conquered by the British Empire in MacDonald's account did hold older ties to other imperial polities, but the interaction between and across empires is generally given less consideration in the analysis.

[46] See for example Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); George Lawson and Robbie Shilliam, 'Beyond Hypocrisy? Debating the "Fact" and the "Value" of Sovereignty in Contemporary World Politics', *International Politics*, 46:6 (2009), pp. 657-70; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, pp. 15-22; Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-39.

within each network depend on their specific logics of hierarchy, which tend to vary considerably from case to case.[47]

The practices on which these networks are constituted, and which are in turn used to manoeuvre within them, also varies – from legal posturing and commercial transactions to tributary diplomacy and show of force. Indeed, there are typically multiple layers of networks, tied into different legal, political and commercial practices, and these are not necessarily neatly overlapping and might well shift over time. They are not necessarily tied to one imperial power either, but might well span multiple empires at once or be tied to several colonial or commercial groups nominally belonging to different metropoles. While initial imperial expansion into new territories might focus on one set of practices, other networks are likely to follow at later stages as other actors and colonial institutions are mobilized or expanded. One set of relations will often precede others, creating a staggered or segmented process of colonization – commercial networks might be the first stage in the process, followed by legal networks attempting to secure rights and privileges of imperial merchants, and then eventually joined by political and military as part of outright annexation. In this sense the classic distinction in history between formal and informal empires is at least partially dissolved,[48] since all imperial configurations are composed of multiple networks

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[47] John Hobson and Jason Sharman, 'The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics: Tracing the Social Logics of Hierarchy and Political Change', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:1 (2005), pp. 63-98; Nexon and Wright, 'What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate?'; David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Alexander Cooley, *Logics of Hierarchy: The Organization of Empires, States, and Military Occupations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in World Politics', *International Organization*, 70:3 (2016), pp. 623-54.

[48] Gallagher and Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade'.

based on different practices, usually layered in ways to exert dominance in one or more spheres, and which practices dominate relations at any given time have more to do with stages of a process than with the inherent nature of a given empire.

**Generative colonialism: Imperial expansion as a driver of change**

Historically imperial expansion was an exceptional driver of transformation at the level of both regional and global systems. The spread of colonialism forced political experimentation in local colonial configurations, both on the part of imperial governments and of local polities resisting or pre-empting colonial incursions and takeovers. Through the process of colonization new polities were formed and old polities were altered or destroyed, highlighting at once the generative and the destructive forces of colonialism.[49]

The changes fostered at the margins of expanding empires caused transformations at the systemic level, as encounters between these empires and local heterogeneous polities altered repertoires of practice and realigned pre-existing networks while causing new ones to emerge. The encounters that took place as imperial networks expanded to include new subjects and territories were central to the formation of international systems, making further expansion possible and rendering various modes of political organization either legible to one another, subject to forceful subjugation or both. These colonial encounters composed new laws, fashioned new political ideas, increased the reach of power, expanded the scope of

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[49] This point falls along the same lines as Michel Foucault's analysis of power as simultaneously a repressive and a productive force in society. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Random House, 1980), pp. 109-33. See also the related argument made by Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton concerning the generative powers of war in Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of War: Fighting, Knowledge, and Critique', *International Political Sociology*, 5:2 (2011), pp. 126-43.

knowledge about the world and carved out new categories of identity and classification. Liminal interactions were thus at the centre of changes in the international system.

Colonialism as a generative force should not be taken as any sort of normative statement, but rather as a historical observation – colonialism was among the strongest forces influencing experimentation of the state form, particularly in the long nineteenth century. The process of colonization shaped fundamental institutions and practices, both in specific colonies and within empires at large. Indeed, colonialism was a significant driver of state formation in general, or, perhaps more accurately, of state transformation and development. Some of this transformation was carried out by colonizers and imperial administrators who claimed territories and created new institutions, but other parts of it were driven by the very people facing potential incorporation by outside forces and who attempted to stave off such incursions by refashioning their own polities and political institutions.

Colonialism drove political experimentation in both direct and indirect ways. Even when European imperialism was more ambition than reality on the ground, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa of the nineteenth century or in East Asia, the presence of imperial networks and the possibility of European incursion spurred a variety of local political experiments and adaptive strategies. This was clearly the case in places as diverse as Hawai'i, Japan and West Africa, which all underwent significant institutional reform as a result of colonial threats in the nineteenth century.[50]

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[50] On the example of legal and political reform and adaptation prior to colonization in the Kingdom of Hawai'i, see in particular Sally Engle Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jonathan Osorio, *Dismembering Lahui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); Noenoe Silva *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). On the rise of the Japanese Empire as a response to the specter of western colonization,

Colonialism was a generative force in a more direct fashion when treaties were drawn up and territories claimed, wholly or partially. These actions fashioned new political spaces or altered existing ones by redrawing borders and adding new layers of sovereignty. Whether it was by strategically recognizing existing polities and altering the hierarchies within which they were embedded prior to colonisation, as was done with Buganda by the British East Africa Company in the 1890s,[51] or by fashioning new polities entirely, as with the demarcation and creation of Rhodesia in the same decade,[52] the process of colonization proved remarkably powerful at radically altering the political landscape of the nineteenth century.

The process of colonialism thus fostered new political configurations at a number of different stages. The threat of colonization spurred on local reforms and led to the use of a variety of adaptive strategies; colonization itself created new political configurations and often influenced practices and institutions in the local polities being colonized as well as in other parts of the empire, whether in the metropole or in other colonies; and the process of decolonization offered another critical juncture, a new generative moment of possible experimentation and adoption of new or rediscovered institutions and state forms.

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see Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 114-39; Alistair Swale *The Meiji Restoration: Monarchism, Mass Communication and Conservative Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-56; William Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 1-40. The West African example is discussed in further detail below.

[51] John Mugambwa 'A "Protected State" in the Uganda Protectorate? Re-examination of Buganda's Colonial Legal Status', *African Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 1:3 (1989), pp. 446-65.

[52] John Galbraith, *Crown and Charter: The Early Years of the British South Africa Company* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 128-53.

**Colonial configurations in the nineteenth century**

A major theme in the scholarship on the history of international systems has been the importance of the nineteenth century as an unparalleled moment of transformation.[53] The century saw historical changes unprecedented in both scale and intensity, and while these were not developments that led to a full homogenization of the state form, it should be clear for anyone engaged in scholarship on the non-Western world that something happened in the nineteenth century that decidedly and fundamentally altered the relationship between Western imperial powers and the rest of the globe. The changes wrought to regional systems by imperial expansion grew in reach and scale to such a degree that a truly global international system began to materialize, even if it was not yet fully fledged by the end of the century.

What follows is a brief sketch of some of the peculiar imperial configurations of the long nineteenth century, as seen through the practice-relational lens presented above. This is by no means a comprehensive analysis of nineteenth century international systems, but rather an

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[53] See for example Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Abacus, 1987); Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, 'World History in a Global Age', *The American Historical Review*, 100:4 (1995), pp. 1034-60; C. A. Bayly, 'The First Age of Global Imperialism, c. 1760-1830', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 26:2 (1998), pp. 28-47; Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlungder Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009); Tony Ballantine and Antoinette Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global, 1870-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Andrew Phillips, 'The Global Transformation, Multiple Early Modernities, and International Systems Change,' *International Theory*, 8:3 (2016): pp. 481-91.

examination of three particularly interesting examples of complex layered spaces shaped in various ways by imperial expansion, meant to illustrate the usefulness of the framework proposed in this article. The examples presented here include the Gold Coast in West Africa, the Qing Empire in East Asia and Samoa in the South Pacific. Each of them has been chosen to illuminate particular aspects of colonial and imperial configurations of the period, offering very different geographical and political settings. They illustrate in turn the relationship between indigenous and European polities in a regional system where European power was tenuous at best; the processes of multiple concurrent European incursions into a regional system dominated by a powerful, if weakened, Asian empire; and political and legal competition over the colonial division of a single insular space at the tail-end of western imperial expansion, providing a blueprint of sorts for future inter-state legal arrangements at the margins of a near-global international system.

All three of these historical examples can be analysed through a myriad of different lenses, including a traditional unit-centred view, but it is my contention that key aspects of each one are only brought to light by employing a relational perspective – and specifically a relational perspective emphasising repertoires of practice and inter-polity networks. By focusing on the relations between the many polities existing in these spaces and analysing the shifts in positionalities within their networks, a fuller picture of the rise of European imperial power in the long nineteenth century begins to emerge. Because imperial and colonial expansion was such a crucial component of the rise of the western-dominated political order in the period, a better understanding of the dynamics of this expansion should be a central concern for anyone interested in the historical development of the increasingly global international system.

*The Gold Coast*

The West African coast provided the grounds for a curious set of relations between European and indigenous polities. Following initial contact, these different polities became entangled within networks of interdependence and competition, and the rise or decline in power of one polity would send ripples across the region, forcing its neighbours to either adapt or submit. In the area of the Gulf of Guinea referred to by Europeans as the Gold Coast, the winding coastline provided multiple points of entry for a number of different European commercial groups.[54] At various points in time, agents from Brandenburg, Britain, Denmark, the Dutch Republic, Portugal and Sweden built or repossessed a range of fortifications and outposts along the coast. These agents sought alliances with different indigenous polities in order to protect their agents and to secure the flow of trade – the most profitable of which was in human bodies.

All of the European companies on the coast were dependent on alliances with African elites in order to maintain their positions and secure their profits. This dependency led to a multi-layered zone of overlapping networks, with connections both between different European groups and between Africans and Europeans, creating a strong interdependence between trading partners and uneven and ambiguous hierarchies.[55] Moreover, even if distant observers in European metropoles held significant disdain for the capacities of indigenous polities, it was fully acknowledged by Europeans on the ground that there were large swathes of the African coast where "the Negroes are the Masters," in the words of one British

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[54] Kwame Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600-1720: A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 24; John Vogt, *Portuguese Rule on the Gold Coast, 1469-1682* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1979), pp. 71-2.

[55] See for example the fate of the Dutch trading community in Elmina, described in Harvey Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans in West Africa: Elminans and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast during the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989).

governor.[56] These networks were thus clearly hierarchical, but power relations within them were not one-sided and shifted over the course of the century.

The rise of the Asante Empire at the dawn of the nineteenth century led to a significant shift in the balance of power on the coast and to the dynamics of the regional system. Historically primarily an inland polity, the Asante came to realize the promise of wealth and resources associated with coastal access, and through a number of local wars with other African polities in the decade between 1806 and 1816 it forced the foreign empires present there to acknowledge its power and reach. This acknowledgement was codified in 1817, when representatives from the British African Company of Merchants signed a treaty partially recognizing Asante claims to much of the coastal territory as well as its African inhabitants.[57] Not willing to bow down to an indigenous power quite so readily, the British agents on the ground continued to circumvent Asante officials, leading to more direct confrontations throughout the 1820s and culminating in a new treaty in 1831, this time decidedly altering the regional system.[58]

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[56] Letter from Thomas Melvil to the Committee of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, quoted in Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), p. 1.

[57] Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (London: J. Murray, 1819); 'The Bowdich Treaty with Ashanti, 7 September 1817', printed in George Metcalfe (ed), *Great Britain and Ghana: Documents of Ghana history, 1807-1957* (London: The University of Ghana, 1964), pp. 46-7.

[58] 'The Peace Treaty with Ashanti, 27 April 1831,' printed in Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, pp. 133-4. Not surprisingly, securing European free trade on the coast had a prominent place in this treaty. Conflict between Asante and the British continued at a lower intensity for at least two decades following the signing of the treaty. See Joseph Adjaye, *Diplomacy and Diplomats in Nineteenth-*

The presence of European imperial powers combined with the growing threat from the indigenous Asante Empire sowed the seed for a new type of political formation among the previously disparate Fante polities on the coast, significantly altering their repertoires of practice. The jostling of competing imperial powers on the coast made old practices impossible and obstructed existing African networks, even as new possibilities of engagement opened up. In the second half of the eighteenth century Fante networks came together in a more organized fashion under the leadership of the Coastal Coalition, and in the nineteenth century the strongest coastal polities formed the Fante Confederation, complete with judiciary, executive council, and constitution, ratified in 1868.[59] The adaptive strategy of the Fante polities, brought about by colonial contact and the threat of imperial annexation from two sides, thus led to the creation of political configurations hitherto unseen on the African coast. This generative effect of the colonial encounter was not limited to the local context of the Gold Coast, but had wider reverberations that influenced subsequent state formation in colonial and postcolonial Africa.

While a story of the rise of and response to the Asante Empire can be told through a lens that casts empires merely as expansive great powers, such an analysis misses key elements of the historical process. Likewise, an intra-imperial perspective focusing on the African coast as a peripheral zone of conquest for the British Empire risks ignoring the interactions between the various polities on the ground, European as well as African. Instead, a focus on the existing coastal networks between European and African groups and the emergence of the

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*century Asante* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 1984). Denmark sold off its remaining holdings to Britain in 1850, in part as a consequence of these developments. See 'Cession to Great Britain from Denmark of forts etc., on the Gold Coast', 17 August 1850, in The British National Archives (henceforth TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 94/412.

[59] Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 88-131.

Asante as an outside threat to these networks points towards a more incisive explanation of historical events. Not only did the relative insularity of early coastal networks and the constant ebb and flow of alliances make Asante incursions possible, given the inland empire's liminal status vis-à-vis these interactions, but the resulting realignment of relations and shifts in positionalities ultimately paved the way for a reconfigured regional system under British hegemony several decades later,[60] which placed both Asante and Fante polities in a clearly subordinate relationship to the government of the new British crown colony.[61]

*The Qing Empire*

The Chinese Empire under the Qing Dynasty was of an altogether different nature than the polity federations of the Atlantic world. Building on the institutions of a centuries-old bureaucratic polity in China and claiming both the mandate of heaven and the symbolic mantle of earlier steppe empires, the Qing represented both departure from and continuation of previous imperial dynasties.[62] Most notably, it gave rise to the most aggressive

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[60] For an analysis of emergent British hegemony in the nearby Niger delta at the tail end of the century, see MacDonald, *Networks of Domination*, 149-81.

[61] For more on the role of liminal actors in unsettling existing balances-of-power, see Mike Glosny and Daniel Nexon, 'The Outsider Advantage: Why Liminal Actors rise to System-wide Domination', paper presented at the ISA Annual Convention, New Orleans, 18-21 February, 2015. What is particularly interesting in the case of the Gold Coast is that the initial rising power was a local, African, empire, rather than a European one.

[62] Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels, Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, vol. 2 - Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 601-2; Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (London: Bodley Head, 2012), pp. 6-10.

expansionary policy in centuries as China grew far beyond its earlier borders, annexing large swathes of westward territory over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[63] The expansion and governance of the empire included examples of a variety of different imperial and colonial practices. Its projection of power ranged from the colonial annexations of Tibet, Taiwan and Inner Mongolia to the tributary relations with Joseon and Ryūkyū, and its modes of internal control included both ethnic differentiation of its subjects and the fashioning of a distinct martial culture at the heart of the imperial project.[64] All of these activities seemingly cemented the Qing Empire's place at the centre of the international system of East Asia, even as European encroachments at the margins began to alter the foundations of this system.

While carrying on its own large-scale imperial project, China saw a gradually expanding European presence on its southern coast, beginning with the Portuguese colonization of Macau in the sixteenth century, during the Ming Dynasty, and culminating in the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, which not only ceded Hong Kong to the British but also signalled the beginning of a more clearly hierarchical dimension to the Sino-European relationship. While sixteenth and seventeenth century incursions into China were primarily carried out by small groups of individual agents, often from a single empire, such as the Portuguese in Macau and the spice traders of the Dutch East India Company, the eighteenth century saw the introduction of the

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[63] Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[64] See Mark Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Culture of War in China: Empire and the Military under the Qing Dynasty* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Kirk Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850-1910* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Canton system, which created a multi-imperial zone around the thirteen factories of the Canton harbour (present-day Guangzhou).[65] Although this system put some means of controlling the flow of commerce into the hands of the Chinese government, it proved impossible to stop local European and American merchant networks, often based in less-tightly controlled Macau, from engaging in a variety of illicit commercial practices, smuggling goods in and out of the country despite official British attempts at enforcing some trade restrictions.[66]

The Treaty of Nanking and the establishment of Hong Kong as a British colony gave way to a new form of treaty-based imperial incursions into China expanding outside the southern shores. The first major consequence of this was the treaty port system along the coast,[67] the most famous port being that of Shanghai. Following the creation of the United Municipal Council in 1854, Shanghai became a uniquely institutionalized inter-polity zone populated by a number of inter-imperial networks. The Council saw representatives from most of the Western empires as well as the Qing Empire divide the city between them, creating a space of

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[65] John Wills, *Peppers, Guns, and Parleys: The Dutch East India Company and China, 1662-1681* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Francis Ross Carpenter, *The Old China Trade: Americans in Canton, 1784-1843* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1976); Paul Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

[66] 'China: O. in C. Commerce', 1843, in TNA, FO 881/449. See also Paul Van Dyke (ed), *Americans and Macao: Trade, Smuggling, and Diplomacy on the South China Coast* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

[67] John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of Treaty Ports, 1842-1854* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

complex and overlapping sovereignty in the process.[68] This was a space of sophisticated legal jockeying and intricate imperial partitioning surpassing any other region at the time, as external imperial powers divided the Chinese city into zones of their own. Each empire made claims to commercial and jurisdictional powers in a way that turned on its head the tenuous hierarchy between the Qing and foreign empires, established a century earlier in Canton.

The spread of western influence on the Chinese coast was a prime example of colonial expansion taking place through a series of networks based on different repertoires of practice. The early commercial networks thus paved the way for later diplomatic and jurisdictional incursions, the partial failure of which ultimately led to outright colonization of certain contact zones. This was not a long-term strategy employed by western empires, however, but originated from the actions of individual and sometimes unrelated groups of actors on the ground, whose acitivity had ramifications for the political process and sometimes served as an excuse for the implementation of one policy or another. Indeed, most of the commercial networks were not easily classifiable as belonging to one empire or another, but were rather trans-imperial in nature, working towards a more or less mutual goal of profit from the China trade. China in turn was not a monolithic imperial polity, but was composed of multiple different networks, not all of which worked towards the same goal of maintaining a specific Sino-centric geopolitical order. This was true well before the outbreak of that most bloody of

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[68] J. H. Hann, 'Origin and Development of the Political System in the Shanghai International Settlement', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22 (1982), pp. 207-29; Marie-Claire Bergère, *Histoire de Shanghai* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2002); Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

nineteenth century civil wars, the Taiping Rebellion, in the middle decades of the century.[69] Indeed, without the collaboration of local Chinese merchants and middlemen and their gradual integration into relatively robust commercial networks, the European trade on the coast would never have been as successful as it was, nor would the colonies of Hong Kong, Macau or Shanghai have seen the growth they did.[70]

The Qing Empire was a multifaceted colonial polity, displaying a wide array of imperial practices that reinforced and expanded the hierarchical networks on which its rule was based. While the Qing had sophisticated strategies of dealing with neighbouring regional powers, their political approach to imperial polities originating from beyond the seas ultimately proved insufficient to tackle the enormity of the challenge posed by Western powers, which themselves were as incapable as the Qing of envisioning a hierarchical order without themselves at the top.[71]

The incursion into China of foreign colonial networks also had ramifications for the nineteenth century conception of international legal institutions. In particular, the colonial

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[69] Philip Kuhn, *Rebellion and its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Thomas Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and Blasphemy of Empire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

[70] See for example John Carroll, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[71] For an insightful study of the development of Chinese policy towards British India, see Matthew Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). For more on the clash between incompatible imperial imaginations, see Erik Ringmar, *Liberal Barbarism: The European Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 69-119.

encounter in China generated one of the more interesting and overlooked inter-imperial bodies of the period – the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. This institution was a formalization of some of the inter-imperial networks within China that became a generative force in its own right, shaping many of the practices that propped up the Qing state in the late nineteenth century and fostering China's integration into the growing, western-dominated, international system. Initially established by European colonial consuls in Shanghai in the 1850s, the Chinese government nominally controlled the Customs Service, which came to generate more revenue for the Qing state than any other single institution at the turn of the century.[72] The Service was at once a Chinese and an inter-imperial organization, drawing legal authority from both Qing and foreign empires and staffed by foreigners at all but the lowest levels, especially during the first decades of its existence. It not only signalled a new period of formalization of inter-imperial relations in the late nineteenth century, but also drove seminal reforms of other Chinese state institutions well into the Republican period, which in turn made China a more legible political space to foreign actors.[73]

*Samoa*

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[72] Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, pp. 439-68; Hans van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 1-22.

[73] Ibid., 172-216. This legibility did not appear out of thin air in the nineteenth century, of course. For earlier Qing engagements with an emerging inter-imperial legal order, consider the treaties between China and Russia dividing up the Central Eurasian steppe in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. See Perdue, *China Marches West,* pp. 161-172; Mark Mancall, *Russia and China: Their Diplomatic Relations to 1728* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

The Samoan Islands, first referred to by European explorers as the Navigator Islands, presents the final example of a multi-layered colonial space. As every corner of the globe had been nominally claimed for one empire or another, the few remaining territories that could be colonized were beset by competing agents of empire, clamouring for control and seeking new ways in which to divide and rule indigenous polities. While the first encounters between Europeans and Samoans took place in the waning decades of the eighteenth century, the middle of the nineteenth century saw a growing number of foreign trading networks passing through the region and establishing a presence there.

Commercial groups from both Western Europe and North America became increasingly invested in the fate of Samoa, and the three main foreign powers on the islands – Britain, the US and Germany – all escalated their political presence in the last decades of the century. Representatives of these empires made claims to harbour rights and extraterritoriality for their agents and forged alliances with local political elites in what at least some powers saw as a competition to "hold Samoa commercially, as well as politically" as one German diplomat put it, rather undiplomatically.[74] In contrast to this aggressive policy, other imperial agents saw their task as one of reaching a stable balance of power. British Commissioner J. B. Thurston was thus instructed to find the "means of promoting the autonomy and peaceful government of the islands by their native authority," since "the present neutral status of the Samoan Islands" was to be "maintained by the joint influence of the three Treaty Powers … each continuing to exclude from consideration questions of annexation or individual

[74] Letter from Consul-General Stuebel to Herbert von Bismarck, 10 June 1884, quoted in 'Report on the Condition of the Samoan Islands by J. B. Thurston, C.M.G., Acting British Commissioner', 1887, in TNA, Colonial Office (CO) 881/8/2, 9.

predominance."[75] At the same time as Britain worked to maintain the status quo, the self-governing colony of New Zealand lobbied intensely for gaining territorial control of Samoa. In the words of Thurston, New Zealand's government "evinced a desire for a general annexation of the islands of the Pacific not under the jurisdiction of any civilized power."[76]

On the face of it, Samoa is the example presented here that seems to most easily fit with a traditional unit-centric conception of empire, emphasising the tenuous and shifting balance of power between the three empires at the end of the century. However, even in this case such an approach risks missing crucial aspects of the process leading to formal colonization and the ultimate shape this colonization took. In particular, the three empires were not unitary state actors operating within their respective national interests, but rather multi-layered networked entities with different internal foci and sometimes-competing aims. The clearest example of this was New Zealand, which, while itself a colony of Britain, displayed its own foreign and colonial policy with goals quite different from those of its imperial metropole. But networks below the level of official colonial politics were arguably equally important. For years leading up to the outbreak of overt political rivalry over Samoa in the 1880s, European and American commercial networks had laid the groundwork for expanding their

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[75] From TNA, CO 881/8/2, 1.

[76] From TNA, CO 881/8/2, 9. See also the correspondence between London and Wellington in *New Zealand Parliamentary Papers, Confederation and Annexation, Papers Relating to the Islands of Samoa and Tonga* (London, 1885), pp. 1-5. Indeed, New Zealand would develop into a quasi-imperial power in its own right, governing several Pacific island colonies including, eventually, Western Samoa. See Patricia O'Brien, 'From Sudan to Samoa: Imperial Legacies and Cultures in New Zealand's Rule over the Mandated Territory of Western Samoa', in Katie Pickles and Catharine Coleborne (eds), *New Zealand's Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 127-46.

spheres of influence in the South Pacific, establishing trade practices and in effect bringing empire to the region well before this became a political priority at the metropolitan level.

These expanding imperial networks on the islands in turn affected the political processes of indigenous groups, leading to an intensification of existing factionalism and geographically based alliances and ultimately leading to the eruption of the first Samoan Civil War in 1886. The role of the Samoan king, which previously seemed to have been an office more akin to the ceremonial leader of a decision making process characterized by intra-elite negotiations, now became laden with expectations on the part of foreign agents. As Robert Louis Stevenson described it in his then-controversial *A Footnote to History*, "although the credit side of the account proves thus imaginary, the debit side is actual and heavy" for the king "is now set up to be the mark of consuls; he will be badgered to raise taxes, to make roads, to punish crime, to quell rebellion: and how he is to do it is not asked."[77]

The conflict between the three foreign empires initially concluded with the Treaty of Berlin, signed in 1889 and making Samoa a tripartite condominium under a joint protectorate of all three powers, while still retaining a nominal recognition of the independence of the Samoan government.[78] This treaty is interesting in its formal institutionalization of an inter-imperial network, in effect creating a realm of shared sovereignty alongside some degree of local autonomy and a thoroughly international Supreme Court of Justice, whose chief Justice could in the last instance be appointed by an outside third party in the form of the King of Sweden and Norway.

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[77] Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (London: Cassell & Company, 1892), p. 8.

[78] 'Germany: Final Act of Conference of Affairs of Samoa', 14 June 1889, in TNA, FO/93/36/30.

While the creation of the condominium went some way towards quelling the internal Samoan war, it only lasted a decade as violence again reached a high point in 1898, leading at that point to the ultimate partitioning and colonization of the islands by Germany and the United States the following year. The process of colonization in Samoa created novel institutions of inter-imperial legal cooperation, further strengthening the role of law and institution-making at the furthest reaches of the international system, which with the annexation of Polynesia now spanned the entirety of the globe. In the context of indigenous Samoan polities and culture colonization was a more unambiguously destructive force, however, undermining and eroding pre-colonial repertoires of practice without replacing them with much of anything.

**Conclusion**

A focus on imperial interaction, colonial expansion and local responses is the first step towards illuminating the relationship between empire and transformations in international systems. As destructive a phenomenon for indigenous cultures and institutions as the expansion of colonial empires undeniably was, the spread of colonialism was also a generative phenomenon, opening up spaces for new polity formations and creating a new breadth of political experimentation borne out of the dynamics of subjugation, resistance and adaptation. Systemic transformations thus took place at the margins of empire, through interaction and accompanying reconfiguration Although the examples presented in the previous section all stem from the nineteenth century, the transformative effects of imperial expansion have clearly influenced the contemporary international system. Even as the imperial powers implemented a new polity model in their former colonial territories following 1945 – that of the modern national-state – sovereignty in practice remained

ambiguous, layered and incomplete throughout the twentieth century.[79] Historical legacies are hard to shake off, and many of the networks formed in past centuries can still be found across the globe today,[80] just as new hierarchical relationships are being established.[81]

While the focus of the present article has been on empires and inter-imperial relations, the implications are broader in nature. Instead of continuing largely within unit-based frameworks of analysis, IR would do well to embrace a network-relational and practice-oriented approach to the study of international systems. Such an embrace would not necessitate strict uniformity in methodological approach or in topics of analysis, but would rather imply a set of broadly shared assumptions about the topography of world politics. Moving beyond unit-centric frameworks and adopting a truly global point of view makes it

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[79] Indeed, the very process of decolonization included numerous examples of political experimentation diverging from the narrow model of the nation-state. See for example the many attempts at transnational federalism in the British Caribbean (Cary Fraser, *Ambivalent Anti-colonialism: The United States and the Genesis of West Indian Independence, 1940-1964* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1994); John Chávez, *Beyond Nations: Evolving Homelands in the North Atlantic World, 1400-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 184-212) and in French Africa (Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[80] Charles Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Justin Hastings, *No Man's Land: Globalization, Territory, and Clandestine Groups in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

[81] See for example Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon '"The Empire will Compensate You": The Structural Dynamics of the U.S. Overseas Basing Network', *Perspectives on Politics*, 11:4 (2013), pp. 1034-50.

clear that there can be no clear-cut division into cores and peripheries, as these are inherently spatially anchored notions and one polity's periphery is another polity's core. While the African West Coast might have been at the periphery of the British Empire for much of the nineteenth century, it was at the core of both the Asante Empire and the Fante Confederation, in the same way that the South China Coast came to be at the core of the Qing Empire while being at the periphery of most European powers.

The notion that more attention needs to be paid to those aspects of world politics that do not map onto neatly divisible state-like units goes well beyond the realm of historical empires and colonisation. Inter-polity hierarchies and transnational networks of violence and of governance are not just things of the past, but features of contemporary world politics. By recasting the way we think about international systems, the temporary nature and historical contingency of the current inter-state system is thrown into stark relief and potential sources of change appear less obscured. Systemic transformations do not happen in sudden tectonic shifts, but through the constant re-constitution and gradual adaptation of practices and through the expansion or protraction of interrelated boundary-crossing networks. Such reconfigurations are very much taking place today, whether broadly acknowledged or not.

By seeking out and mapping the various interrelated networks in which interactions are embedded, and especially the repertoires of practice and the logics of hierarchy ordering these networks, we can ultimately gain a clearer understanding of the processes that reconfigure international systems and drive change in world politics. This would move us closer to an understanding of why certain political configurations become the primary actors in given regions and periods as opposed to others, and why some polity types persist for a long time while others are subsumed, subjugated or fall away.