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Empire Off-Center: Introduction

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Special Section

Empire Off-Center

Miloš Jovanović and Giulia Carabelli

Introduction

The goal of this special section is to outline new, *off-center* perspectives on empire and imperial formations. We highlight moments and places in which the historical contours of empire become thinner, contrasting with the world they ostensibly speak of. Our common guiding principle is to heighten the discrepancy of such offsets and sharpen the haze beneath (Carabelli et al.). As we argue, doing so necessitates moving beyond the methodological center of historical scholarship. Putting history in conversation with sociology, theories of space, political economy, settler colonial studies and anthropology, the essays in this special section explore theoretically and empirically how empire is constituted both within and outside other historical processes. We see the imperial *longue durée* as constitutive not only of the past, but of our broader social reality. A history that can address our imperial present, we contend, must take contemporary questions as its starting point.

Today more than ever, imperial histories loom in the background of contemporary debates, calling into question François Hartog's assessment that the present appears as "our sole horizon" (Hartog 203). The world remains besieged by imperial zones of belonging. Power, hierarchy, and difference remain guiding principles of world affairs and everyday life. Cultures and worldviews alike expound an imperial ethos, reflecting the difficulty of thinking beyond past concerns. Certainly, historians must battle the unjust weight of such past debris, which occludes

liberatory perspectives from present views. Against this cataract, a direct reading of empire as both an object of history and the bearer of meaning in the present can appear impenetrably difficult. Yet it is precisely from such offset positions that one can perceive the broad reach and lasting legacies of imperial formations (Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue).

At its core, the interdisciplinary analysis of empire that follows is a way to think through other times. Conceptually, it aligns itself with Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder's point that "academic history has never managed to transcend its eighteenth-century origins as an empiricist enterprise" (Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder). Accordingly, this special section invites the study of empire beyond what Michel Trouillot would call "historicity 1" (29), beyond the material structure of historical processes. Certainly, our discussions contribute to ongoing debates in *History of the Present* on the nature of empire as a historical phenomenon (Burton; Tambar; Chatterjee; Kim; Hansen and Jonsson). Yet our ambition to view empire "off-center" has broader aspirations.

The forms of colonial amnesia that persist in contemporary scholarship are a case in point. In the case of postcolonial studies, entire histories of empire have been written from the curated viewpoint of British and (to a lesser extent) French archives. If the postcolonial challenge to empire is just, it remains trapped by an archive that is only legible within present global configurations of power. Offset from the maritime model of imperial might, the contribution of our special section comes from sites marginal to the postcolonial gaze. We enunciate from the loci of Transylvanian rurality, Habsburg imperial space, plantation empire in Indonesia, queer desire in imperial and contemporary Ethiopia, and the United States as a unique entanglement of settler colonialism and slavery. Doing so, we look to off-center two imagined geographies—that of postcolonial studies and the scholarship on so-called "continental empires."

Our off-center perspective on imperial pasts emerged in conversations between the two guest editors of this special section, Miloš Jovanović, an urban historian, and Giulia Carabelli, a cultural sociologist, during a meeting of the Max Planck Research Group *Empires of Memory* in Vienna in the spring of 2018. Carabelli and Jovanović reflected on the multiple entanglements of Habsburg and colonial pasts in the city with their colleague, Annika Kirbis. The very term that informed our conversations, *off-center*, had earlier origins. It emerged in the mid-2010s at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in debates between Jovanović, as a historian of the Balkans, and Zachary Sell, a historian of British empire and US slavery, as well as one of the contributing authors. In this early form, thinking empire *off-center* was also anchored in conversations with Antoinette Burton, to whom we express our gratitude.

The Viennese encounter between Carabelli, Jovanović, and Kirbis resulted in a multidisciplinary conference held in October–November 2018 at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Göttingen. We invited researchers of empire to employ the concept of off-center in their academic and art practice, and expanded our thinking beyond off-set geographies to take into account affect, hierarchized difference, and more-than-human imperial legacies. The perspective of “empire off-center” that emerged during the conference continues to reverberate in a number of venues (Jovanović, Miletić, and Radovanović; Carabelli et al.) and informs the essays that comprise this special section.

Paying close attention to the layers of empire, the essays in this special section highlight the role of difference in shaping not only the *within* but also the *in between* of imperial structures. By exploring specters of coloniality from offset geographies and off-center vantage points, the contributors point to broader questions: Where can empire be situated? What kind of spaces does it produce? And where do we find its mark in the present?

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