

3. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

»Exit Options«: Crises and Scope of Imperial Power

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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Crises and scope of imperial power – what is new about this subject matter?

Comparative research on empires is presently experiencing a renaissance. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that it has meanwhile become fashionable to express America's current world-power status in categories used to describe that of an empire and to thus seek portents of its impending demise. The history of empires hitherto has been primarily the history of the inevitable decomposition of a form of rule – with its stratified forms of sovereignty, multi-ethnic territories, and the charismatic constructs sanctioning its legitimacy – that is diametrically opposed to the successful model of the modern nation-state. In the imperial mindscape, crises are always precursors of an ultimate collapse. Our approach, by contrast, is to understand empires as a still on-going option for the political organization of large territories. Accordingly, we analyze crises as historically contingent, as processes of negotiation between social groupings in the center and the periphery regarding the configuration of the empire. What we mean are processes whose outcome is fundamentally open. Crisis must not necessarily be an indicator of breakdown. It can also be understood as a chance for transformation of the imperial edifice.

BCZ: In this respect what does »negotiation processes« mean? Isn't empire merely another word for foreign domination by means of force?

That would be a shortsighted perspective. In our view coercive power can rarely constitute an empire and has even less chance of holding it together for any duration. Empire is also not something that an overwhelming power center inflicts on defenseless peripheries. In our view an empire is a system of social interactions between societies and within those societies, and these interactions primarily take place at the periphery. This is where – in contingent power relationships determined by self-interest and the need for protection in interplay with influence

emanating from the power center – it is determined who exactly belongs to the empire. Because imperial power is dependent on this cooperation («collaboration» has connotations that are too pejorative) it is fundamentally volatile. The »imperial project« – the integration options offered by the central power – plays a large role for any successful bonding with the periphery. Crises present a chance for renegotiating these power relations. Another question therefore is whether or not imperial elites have shown an ability to learn from repeated crises.

BCZ: What is the understanding of crisis underlying current research?

First of all it is important not to create a teleological link between crises of imperial power and narratives of decline. Such notions as decline, dissolution or collapse do not fundamentally describe crises but catastrophes. We think it an absolute mistake to retroactively ascribe this devolution or »decisive turn of events« – the crisis – to the history of empires; a mistake based on the specious privilege of historians already knowing the outcome of that history. We are interested in the conditions under which frictions appertaining to the exercise of imperial power emerge and which can be perceived as a crisis. The prerequisite of warning signs, the question as to the conditions for their manifestation, and the question as to who exactly defines what might be seen as »threatened imperial interests« – all underscore an approach that has multiple perspectives and is open-ended. What we ultimately understand by a »crisis« is the fundamental questioning of an empire's structure or its ability to project its power. This challenge can indeed threaten the empire's existence – or not.

BCZ: What findings did the colloquium yield?

The discussion with a number of the most distinguished German-speaking scholars of empire and imperialism did in fact confirm the epistemic value of the approach. We still need to investigate not only the destructive potential of empires but the factors contributing to their long-term stability. Particular attention should be paid to the inner-societal processes in the periphery as well as the long-term impact of crises. Well-considered and constructive comments were primarily made with regard to the danger of the (rhetorical) idealization that accompanies the use of such terms as »negotiation processes,« »imperial project,« and »ability to learn.« By contrast they emphasized the situativity and flexibility of imperial power relations as well as the role played by coercive force and fear.

BCZ: And what now?

At the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, under the rubric »Crisis and Transformation of Empires,« a research group consisting of Andreas Stucki, Dierk Walter and Claudia Weber is doing a comparative analysis of the late Spanish, Portuguese, British and Soviet empires. The common point of departure for this research is our alternative view of empires. In close contact with well-known scholars of empire such as Ulrike von Hirschhausen in Rostock and Stig Förster in Bern, we will be refining and disseminating this view through publications and conferences.