Workshop: "Making the State-System Unfamiliar: The Dynamics of the Global Empire-System, 1856-1955"

Co-Convenors:

Daniel Green, University of Delaware, dgreen@udel.edu

Thomas Müller, Bielefeld University, thomas.mueller@uni-bielefeld.de

Workshop description:

This workshop builds on recent contributions to international history and global historical sociology that highlight the imperial underpinnings of the international system. It problematizes standard, mainstream IR narratives of history that portray international history as the history of an unfolding state-system. Instead, we argue that for approximately a century from 1856 to 1955 (symbolically ending with Bandung), the international system was a **global empire-system** dominated by empires, empire-building, and empire-friendly norms and values rather than a state-system organised around sovereign states. While there were sovereign states in these years, the more common unit identity was imperial power and colony. Colonial ambitions and territorial conquest blossomed after the Crimean War in 1856 and trended steadily upward, peaking in the infamous, globe-spanning and rapacious New Imperialism of 1880-1910. World War I began the erosion of the empire-system, but the League and the Inter-War Period can still be fruitfully understood as an empire-system in adaptation. After World War II the empire-system slowly decayed and was replaced by a state-system.

The **possible topic areas for papers** include the following questions:

• Why did political units inside and outside Europe strive to become and build empires? What socialization pressures were present?

• What norms, practices and institutions shaped and sustained the empire-system, including diplomatic and treaty practices? Did an "imperial systemic culture" develop?

• What was the role of hierarchy – e.g. status and racial hierarchies – in the empire-system, its norms and institutions?

• What conflict and cooperation dynamics did the empire-system generate? How did it enable the two World Wars?

• How did empire-system logics compete with state-system logics for organising global order?

• How did international political thought embrace, enable, but also question and challenge the empire-system?

• How did actors contest and resist the empire-system at the local, regional and transnational levels?

We ask all paper presenters to consider the added value of the empire-system idea and its alternative historical narrative to IR. How does it disrupt standard, state-centric IR accounts of international relations? What are its important insights? How can these contribute to theory-building? We also encourage presenters to reflect on changes in the empire-system over time. Papers need not address the entire period from 1856 to 1955; the objective is rather to collectively develop a "**meso-periodisation**" (see Hobson and Lawson 2008) **of the global empire-system**. Papers can contribute to this project by: pointing to structures and dynamics unique to certain phases; highlighting watersheds, discontinuities and critical junctures; or discussing the processes and driving forces that explain shifts in the structures and dynamics of the empire-system. Such a meso-periodisation exercise poses the challenge of shifting the bases of IR theorising from allegedly transhistorical patterns and transposable variables to thick historical narratives of a variegated and evolving global system.