Call for Papers

Looping Back?

Bureaucratic Knowledge, Colonial Administrations and Socio-Political Change in Imperial Histories

10-11 May 2021, Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands)

Organisers: Henrik Chetan Aspengren (Swedish Institute of International Affairs), Dries Lyna and Luc Bulten (Radboud University Nijmegen)

Driven by commercial and territorial ambitions European and Asian dynasties from the early modern period onwards continuously sought to expand their dominion. In order to consolidate their power in these peripheral territories, European and Asian empires installed a variety of localized institutions, ranging from tax administrations, census bureaus and courts of law. Their administrative efforts to make the imperial state ‘legible’ and efficiently extract resources, secure trade and ensure social control resulted in an ever expanding imperial bureaucracy.

This two-day workshop will explore how the knowledge products of these imperial bureaucracies afforded local agents unintended opportunities to navigate that same imperial state. Inspired by Ian Hacking’s looping effect we will analyze how the tools and concepts of imperial rule in themselves furnished the very possibility of social and societal change. We will trace and analyse how censuses, surveys, procedures of registration, governance or law enabled local actors to advance causes of their own concern and empowerment. Bureaucracy originally intended to provide legibility to the imperial state could thus be ‘looped back’ as a crowbar by local actors to impose social change.

The aim of this workshop, hence, is to better understand the processes, motivations and modalities in specific imperial settings through which local actors turned the concrete practices of an inherently ‘foreign’ administration back on itself. Central questions are:

- How was knowledge of administrative procedures generated, brokered and disseminated among indigenous actors?
- How did individuals established parallel institutions, or initiated social movements or groups in relation to administrative interventions?
- How did colonial data and bureaucratic knowledge resurface in indigenous political arguments?
- How did bureaucratic narratives travel and merge with local narratives of rights, governance, security, and ownership?
- What was the materiality of local responses to colonial bureaucratic interventions (the esthetics of locally produced surveys, censuses, title deeds, artefacts of registration and identification)?
- What strategies did locals develop to influence the conduct of administrative institutions, swaying individuals within state structures, and rally and enlist local public opinion for change?

We invite researchers from across disciplines to consider these questions in relationship to their own empirical expertise in imperial histories from the early modern period up until the mid-20th century. We welcome proposals from both junior and senior scholars, and comparative studies are certainly encouraged.

Abstracts (max. 300 words) should be sent to henrik.aspengren@ui.se before May 1st 2020. Decisions on acceptance of presentations will be communicated no later than mid-June 2020. The organisers will apply for funds to cover transportation and accommodation costs. For more information, contact one of the workshop’s organisers, or check the website of the research group Categories Contested (https://www.ru.nl/categoriescontested/).