

The Overseas World and the European Nation-State, 1860s-1970s

The study investigates the role of tropical and subtropical regions in the developmental concepts and practices of European states by focusing on the cases of France, Germany, and Italy, in relation to Britain, the economic hegemon of the time. The analysis is placed firmly in the global domain. It is held that modern state agency in Europe formed with reference to the material dynamics of globalization. These reflected the prospects as well as the difficulties of national economic development under different geo-economic constellations.

The views of ‘expert-practitioners’ (experts who acted as advisers to states, as state officials or politicians) serve as a tool to discuss the formation of state doctrine and agency. ‘Overseas’ regions became relevant to European states as economic opportunities and also in crisis management. In this process, political control was an integral part of rational modernization. Although the paths of national development differed according to the conditions of individual economies, important commonalities can be identified in historical periods.

The liberal globalization of the mid-nineteenth century turned out to be ambiguous: it opened up new economic prospects for countries in Europe, but it also proved to be socially and economically disruptive. Designs of colonial globalism were intended to cope with these disruptions. Between the 1880s and 1900s, overseas control was geared towards the quest to ‘complete’ globalization by incorporating Africa and Southeast Asia. This involved the setting of norms of development and governance as a means to support national modernization in Europe. This quest had a technical-economic dimension related to the management of modern states and a developmental one at a time at which nation-states in Europe acquired a function for the welfare of mass societies. States, for instance, took on a role in organizing the production of overseas foodstuffs, importantly tropical vegetable fats. Moreover, state management involved debates about colonies as technical laboratories and for knowledge creation with regard to natural resources with links to the fields of geology, biology, and medicine. To some extent, the debates about colonial raw materials and the development of modern states in Europe prefigures those about global governance and intellectual rights on patents for natural resources during the globalization of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In the 1920s and 1930s, then, overseas control ought to play a more specific role for economic crisis management in Europe. In Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the demand for colonial space was linked to expectations that colonial raw materials could assist in protecting hard currency reserves. For instance, Corrado Gini, the prominent Italian political activist and economic statistician connected the need for Italian colonies to Italy’s problem to obtain cheap raw materials. In 1920, he had been the League of Nations’ investigator on tropical raw materials and problems of industrialization in Europe. In the depression of the 1930s, however, Gini’s lobbying for Italian colonies demanded the reform of the political world order dominated by Britain and became increasingly removed from concerns of economic management.

At this juncture, the investigation links up with my book *Money and the end of empire* in two ways. Firstly, the period of economic recovery in Britain after the Second World shows how

trade in colonial raw materials, in actual fact, could help to shield currency reserves and support the balance of payments. Secondly, the period of economic liberalization ushered in a phase that reconfigured Europe's economic relations with the tropical and subtropical world. The period of the 1950s and 1960s ended Europe's preoccupation with overseas agrarian resources in debates about national development. The period of fostering complementarities with overseas colonies was replaced by one in which European states sought to immunize their economies from possible claims on their resources from new states in the 'developing world', namely Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

The book concludes with a chapter about the globalization of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. This perspective offers interesting points of comparison with the historical topics under investigation. These include the role of nation-states in global governance; the renewed demands for agricultural raw materials by producers in advanced economies, not least again vegetable oils; and some parallels in the demand for external raw materials in the case of the 'classical' industrialization of China, epitomized by its relations with Africa.

In the most general terms, the book studies historical aspects of the global ordering of European states in the contextual dynamics between economic structure and political agency.

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