

## Empire and Accumulation

**Dr Jonathan Saha** *ISRF Mid-Career Fellow 2019-20*

*NOTE: The Mid-Career Fellowship application form may have been updated since this proposal was submitted.*

### **Abstract**

Over the last two decades histories of imperialism have been invigorated by studies of "circulation". Through a focus on circulation the webs and networks that enabled flows of people, commodities and ideas around the world have been productively uncovered to reveal the geographies and global interconnections of European empires. Through this fellowship I will argue that the comparatively neglected, yet intimately linked, concept of "accumulation" can have a similar effect on the field. I will develop the concept from its roots in critical political economy so that, as well as the accumulation of capital, it can shed light on the accumulation of ideas, texts, and objects in empires.

For political economists accumulation differs from mere hoarding in that it connotes the acquisition of capital for use in generating further capital. It is this reproductive and self-perpetuating aspect of this conception of accumulation that makes it a useful one for the study of imperialism. While accumulation has already been put to use to study the economic exploitation of colonies, it has analytical purchase for a wider range of imperial processes. The acquisition of objects and texts, and, more abstractly, knowledge and ideas, was central to the functioning of imperial regimes. By understanding these processes of aggregation as forms of accumulation, their dynamics and post-colonial legacies can be better understood.

This project takes as its case study the British Empire and its commercial connections with colonial and independent Myanmar. Using the hitherto under-used oil and timber company records held by the London Metropolitan Archive, the project will explore the histories of imperial accumulation within these collections, while simultaneously conceptualising this archive itself as a product of accumulation.

### **The Research Idea** *The innovative thesis of the project*

British imperialism instigated and fostered processes of accumulation across the world. Objects were looted, purchased and, in numerous other ways, acquired for ever-expanding museum collections. Paperwork inexorably built up in filing cabinets across

administrative centres. Colonial-era scholarship begat more and more research and publications. Capital travelled the globe and returned with interest. This project will be the first to look across these processes and bring accumulation explicitly to the fore in research into the Empire.

In order to study the interconnected imperial accumulation of objects, texts, knowledge and capital, the project will focus on Myanmar. Using the hitherto under-utilised company records of oil and timber firms operating in the country held at the London Metropolitan Archives, the project will treat accumulation as a cultural and social phenomena, rather than an exclusively economic one. These archives are especially suited for such a project since their content is diverse, containing: files on colonised labour populations; correspondence with museums and educational institutions; letters to colonial and post-colonial state officials; folders of academic research; and documents outlining capital investments. While uncovering the histories of accumulation recorded in this archive, the project will analyse the archive itself as a product of accumulation.

Accumulation is a process that encourages acquisition for the sake of further acquisition. By analysing Empire through its accumulations we can better understand how imperial formations reproduced and perpetuated themselves in changing historical contexts.

### **Background** *Current research reference points and their limitations*

The relationship between capitalist accumulation and European imperialism was a foundational area of study in imperial historiography. Marxist theorists and historians deployed the concept to trace the links between financial capital, industrialisation and imperial expansions. Subsequent economic historians of empire refuted and complicated these understandings over the course of the twentieth century. As a result, studies using accumulation as a central concept have been few and far between. Some scholarship on settler colonialism and post-colonial violence has revived Marx's concept of "primitive" accumulation to understand the political economy of the brutal dispossession and displacement of particular communities. These studies notwithstanding, as a concept accumulation has remained mostly at the margins of recent scholarship on imperialism.

In contrast circulation has enjoyed considerable discussion as a feature of imperialism. The re-imagining of the geography of European empires away from a core and periphery model to network model has refocused studies towards global flows of peoples, commodities and ideas. These webs of interconnections are understood to have pre-figured, constituted, sustained and, ultimately, undone imperial formations. There have been extended debates over the agency of colonised actors within these circulations, as well as over the centrality of oceanic connections. Accumulation has not been extensively explored within these studies, despite the two concepts sharing scholarly roots in critical political economy where they are considered inextricably linked.

Combining theories of accumulation with recent theorisations of archival production that excavate the underlying logics of collection, the project will also develop innovative archival methodologies (see Methodology section below).

**The Focus** *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

Historians and social scientists have long sought to understand the continuities and discontinuities brought about by decolonisation. The extent to which imperialism set into motion the tensions and struggles that have played out in postcolonial nations is a much contested question, as is the extent to which the history of imperialism continues to haunt the political cultures of former-imperial powers. These discussions have also played out in the public sphere. The presence of artifacts acquired through imperialism, or commemorating imperial histories, have become highly disputed. The historical benefits of imperialism enjoyed by elite institutions have been a source of some public disquiet. Focusing on accumulation cannot definitively resolve these debates, but it can offer a fresh approach to interrogating them.

Processes of accumulation, through their internal reproductive drive, shape and inform the motives and actions of individuals and institutions. Through decolonisation, some forms of imperial accumulation would have been disrupted. Others would have persisted comparatively unaffected. As a result, a focus on accumulation can help to identify unsustainable colonial projects that were ill-equipped to survive in the absence of the resources of the imperial regime. Conversely, a focus on accumulation can also aid analysis of which groups continued to benefit from imperial formations into the postcolonial period. In other words, by focusing on

accumulation we can more precisely unpick the legacies of imperialism. This project will take as its case study the particularly contentious history of Myanmar to explore these questions.

**Theoretical Novelty** *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

British imperialism did more than link together far-flung places from across the globe and foster flows of people, objects and ideas: it dispossessed some people and enriched others. Accumulation can be a concept that enables scholars to understand both these processes within one conceptual lens. The circulation of people, objects and ideas was facilitated by accumulation. Moreover, people, objects and ideas clustered in certain sites in the Empire and their presence fostered further circulations and greater accumulation. While circulations are undoubtedly important to understand, so are origins and destinations. Focusing primarily on accumulation helps us to situate circulation within processes of extraction and consumption, without returning to the outmoded understanding of the former being necessarily coterminous with the colonised periphery and the latter being coterminous with the imperial centre.

Through this the project re-works the concept of accumulation to make it applicable to cultural and social processes, as well as to political economy. Imperialism did not only facilitate the perpetual acquisition of labour, natural resources and capital, it also fostered the acquisition of objects, texts and ideas. The construction of archives, the building of museums and the generation of knowledge can also be understood as part of processes of imperial accumulation.

By re-conceptualising accumulation to make it more theoretically expansive, the research will provide a lens to better understand imperial and colonised actors' motivations, as well as the constrained contexts and conditions of their actions.

**Methodology** *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry*

The primary aim of the project is to develop accumulation as a concept capable of analyzing the movement and acquisition of texts, objects, ideas, and capital in empires. To develop and test this expanded conception of accumulation, the empirical inquiry of project will focus on my particular area of expertise, British rule in Myanmar and its aftermath. The empirical material that will be explored will be the records of Steel Brothers Limited, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation, and Standard Chartered

Bank, all of whom owned and operated oil and timber interests in the country. These records are held in the London Metropolitan Archives. The initial scoping work that I have done in these collections reveals a range of topics contained within the documents that will shed light on each of the forms of imperial accumulation that the project will elaborate upon. These extensive but largely overlooked records will be researched using archival methodologies.

Central to the methodology deployed and refined through this empirical inquiry is accumulation as a concept. Archival methodologies have recently attempted to read archives "along the grain". This means that anthropologists, philosophers and historians have considered the dynamics, desires and processes that produced and shaped the content of archives in order to better interpret and analyze that content.

These archives are the product of accumulations of texts and objects, but also by implication also of knowledge and capital. Aligning theories of accumulation with archival research methodologies thus forms a pivotal concern of the project.

**Work Plan** *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended.*

Over the twelve months, the project will be broadly divided into three four-month periods in which the focus of the research will shift. These periods are not envisaged to be discrete but overlapping. In the first four month period the focus will be on further building my knowledge of the relevant literature and on conducting the empirical inquiry in the London Metropolitan Archives. The latter will involve a month-long research trip to London to gather materials. In the second period, the focus of the project will shift onto analysis. The theoretical literature and empirical data will be brought together to develop and hone the concept of accumulation. In this period I will begin drafting a manuscript for a journal article. The third period will entail collaboration with other scholars and the dissemination of the ideas. This will be done through the submission of the article manuscript to the journal *Theory and Society* and through an interdisciplinary workshop bringing together scholars from development studies, English literature, history, anthropology and sociology. This workshop will aim towards drafting an edited collection on the links between empire and accumulation.

**Outcome** *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged.*

In the longer-term there will be outcomes of the project in addition to work on the journal article and edited collection that will be developed and drafted in the duration of

the fellowship. The fellowship will lay the theoretical groundwork for a wider study that moves beyond this initial archival research and its focus on Myanmar to working with museum collections in the United Kingdom. It will also work with private archival collections that have built up in Yangon. Both will build on my public engagement experiences with the museum sector and Burmese cultural organisations. This longer-term project will also move beyond the case study of Myanmar to consider accumulation and imperialism in comparative contexts, through widening contacts out from the workshop to build a network of interested scholars. In terms of outputs, it is envisaged that the research will culminate in at least one further journal article, aimed at *Comparative Studies in Society and History* and a single-authored monograph.