

Lenny A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840–1920* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019), xxiii + 295 pp., \$70.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 82142 373 8.

German colonialism has received a great deal of attention in recent years. The same applies to the history of German settlement and Prussian imperial policy in the eastern borderlands of the German Empire, and to the Prussian colonial fantasies projected onto this region. A comparative perspective that would join the two dots – the German colonial subjugation of the Poles, and the Polish colonial agency in diverse overseas colonial projects – has, for the most part, been missing. Lenny A. Ureña Valerio's ambitious study attempts to close this gap by connecting, on the one hand, the German civilising mission in its eastern borderlands with the overseas colonisation in Africa,¹ and on the other, the Polish engagement in the colonial encounter in Africa with the establishment of Polish colonies in Brazil. These four main foci determine the structure of the book that addresses the “cultural reverberations of colonial system in the eastern borderlands and the effect cultural relations in the eastern borderlands had on overseas colonial projects” (p. 3), as well as on “the political effectiveness of colonial discourse in Prussian Poland and its relationship to national movements in the region” (p. 184). Thus, the study examines the German colonial encoding of the Polish-inhabited parts of the Prussian and later German Empire as well as the double and fluid colonial self-positioning of the Polish-speaking Prussian citizens who, by searching for their place within the European colonial order, hovered between oppression and self-proclaimed colonial visions. As the author persuasively argues, the latter came to represent the Polish attempts to invert their subalternity and present themselves as equally ‘civilised’ and with cultural-colonial potential equal to that of the leading European nations. The starting point for analysing these moments of making and remaking colonial subjects, phantasies and imperial tensions, is medicine. Owing to its recourses to biopolitical life processes, medicine was the most powerful political instrument for demographic control as well as the shaping of colonial subjects. Indeed, the medical gaze, brought into sharp focus by the author's postcolonial approach, offers a glimpse into the most profound imperial transformation processes that, at the time, were to be achieved and explained through biological patterns.

1 On the comparative population policy between internal and overseas colonial German imperial frontiers, see Dörte Lerps' book *Imperiale Grenzräume. Bevölkerungspolitik in Deutsch-Südwestafrika und den östlichen Provinzen Preußens 1884–1914* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016).

The study is organised into five chapters. The first one “On the Fringes of Imperial Formations” demonstrates how the German literary, philosophical and scientific – in short, intellectual – making of Polishness evolved since the late Enlightenment and how it, in the context of the typhus epidemic of 1848 in Upper Silesia and the cholera epidemic of the 1860s-1870s, took on a medical form that constituted the finishing touches. As fascinating as the approach is, it is unfortunately not very convincing and does not provide any new insights. There are hardly any connections established between the views of individual scholars and the epidemiological moments presented in the chapter: Gustav Freytag, Georg Forster and Immanuel Kant are offered as the most influential German voices. Little more than a summary of their ideas can be discerned here, however. The extent to which they were formative for the German public and for German politics is not demonstrated. The same applies to the recommendation by Rudolf Virchow for the Prussian government on how to contain further epidemics in the Polish lands by, amongst other strategies, culturally ‘uplifting’ the Poles. Since this opinion gained traction through all of the ensuing epidemiological crises, a stronger contextualisation would be helpful in order to fully understand how it eventually led, as shown in the second chapter on “Disease, Race and Space,” to the inscribing of disease in the Polish body and the Polish landscape. During the course of this process, the Poles started to be perceived as carriers of infectious diseases, “given that infection usually followed an east to west course” (p. 38). The spread pattern is indeed relevant as it raises the question as to which Poles the Prussian authorities had in mind? It is one of biggest weaknesses of the book that it focuses on the Prussian-Polish borderlands, but the phenomena it seeks to address – the Prussian colonial making of Polishness, and the counterpart Polish colonial phantasies – are not restricted to the Prussian Poles. Rather, the book draws on examples from all over the Polish-speaking territories. Instead of enriching the perspective, this leads to misunderstandings and historical inadequacies, not to mention the assumption of a homogeneous Polish culture at a time when, for example, in some Prussian Eastern territories, confessional identity was still more relevant than the national one. The notion that the German East and the tropics were, to give another example of weak contextualisation, “easily exchangeable in people’s colonial imaginations” (p. 63), as claimed by the author when discussing the medical discourse on acclimatisation theories and environmental effects on biological differences, can be easily refuted as soon as one goes beyond the political debate. Without doing so, the authors’ claims to give voice to the people are not met.

The next two chapters shift our view to the overseas colonial encounters. Chapter three on “Intersecting Roads” discusses the cross-identification of Emin

Pasha in the Ottoman Empire, and both Robert Koch and Jan Czekanowski in East-Central Africa, by asking how “did Poles envision themselves vis-a-vis Germany’s incursions in overseas colonies?” (p. 78). It further demonstrates the laboratory role of colonies for scientific experiments and for the production of differences by simultaneously searching for similarities. Here again, the role of medicine is emphasised for the population policy and for the protection of Germans from degeneration – a threat perceived as coming from both the overseas territories and internal colonies. Chapter four on “For your Freedom and Ours” addresses the already quite well researched ‘Polish’ expedition by Stefan Szolc-Rogozinski to Cameroon as well as the literary work of Henryk Sienkiewicz. It highlights the distinctive function of such initiatives and storytelling for the creation of Polish self-esteem and the overcoming of feelings of inferiority by simultaneously embracing colonial racial hierarchies. To bring the book to a close, the fifth and last chapter on “Creating the Polish Nation Abroad” focuses on the Polish colonisation attempts in Brazil with the establishment of the Polish colony in Paraná that quickly became a reference point for the Polish colonial imagination. The Poles who emigrated there, free to practice their culture, became part of the Brazilian racial ‘whitening project’, in which they inscribed themselves by attributing the same (negative) attitudes to the natives as had been projected onto them in Europe.

The book offers great insights into the colonial, German and Polish fantasies by addressing their various different angles and subjugation practices. The imperial and colonial realities seem, however, to be lost somewhere within this very ambitious study. Many sub-chapters move far beyond the Polish-German borderlands and colonial entanglements to the point of losing the connection with the regional context. Hence the book reads like a collection of separate, not always related stories. These are, admittedly, fascinating insights into Polish history in its transnational and global context. Yet, they often have little to do with the Polish-Prussian colonial discourse, which can only be gleaned with much effort, provided the reader has sufficient prior contextual knowledge. The way in which the Prussian colonial subjugation strategies to which they themselves had been subjected were adopted by the Poles into their own colonial performance is thus missing, and where it is mentioned, the references are only very fleeting and within very loose contexts. In addition, the narrative is at times hard to follow up and/or verify due to a paucity of references.

A study that looks at historical developments and debates over 80 years in at least three different geographical contexts, and does so in only 186 pages, cannot offer in-depth insights but only an initial invitation to the topic. One can debate the extent to which the success of the book depends on the admittedly very exciting premise for the study, and to what extent the idea’s

implementation and thus the content is equally important. To reiterate, the theoretical approach is highly complex and very promising. Unfortunately, it is not as effective as it could be, and thus its potential is insufficiently exploited. The approach is, without doubt, a very innovative one. It will hopefully open up new perspectives, not only on Prussian-Polish colonial entanglements but, most of all, on the complex and often contradictory process of the making and remaking of the colonial 'self' and 'others' that occurred in a constant dialogue between internal and overseas colonies, between colonial subjects and agents, between entanglements stretching across these artificially conceived dichotomies. Indeed, even though it only partially meets the high demands it has set for itself, this study is a great invitation to free the European colonial history from its bilaterality and binational approaches. The focus here is instead on the cross-cultural encounters that happened across the traditional political boundaries between actors who positioned themselves differently depending on the context, often had fluid identities in the field of political hierarchies, and who, despite political expectations and positions attributed to them, did enter into dialogue and reshape colonial settings.

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