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Book Review: Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins

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Book Reviews

Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, eds. *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*. Palgrave and MacMillan: London, 2015.

It is a myth that Switzerland was ever really isolated from global affairs, and in fact the Swiss participated in colonial activity throughout the world. This fact is at the core of the collection of essays examined here. This volume, *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, edited Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer Tiné, provides examples of the effects of Swiss enterprises on other powers' colonies. The editors make it clear that from at least the days of the Roman Empire, Swiss involvement international affairs was significant. They place this work in newer fields of historiography, one field stresses a Swiss presence in colonies and a second discusses 'new imperial history,' showing that the colonies had just as much effect on the metropolises as the metropolises had on the colonies. This study of Swiss 'colonialism,' illustrates the Swiss participating in 'colonialism at the margins,' or effecting other powers' colonies while not having any of their own.

Part I considers the presence and influence of Swiss scientists in the colonial world. In "On the Tropical Origins of Alps: Science and the Colonial Imagination of Switzerland, 1700-1900," Bernhard C. Schär discusses the comparison in Swiss scientific literature between the primeval Alpine regions and the tropics. Swiss scientists provided significant support to the theories and rationale behind scientific racism during the 19th century, discussed in Pascal Germann's essay, "Race in the Making: Colonial Encounters, Body Measurements and the Global Dimensions of Swiss Racial Science, 1900-1950." "The Other's Colony: Switzerland and the Discovery of Côte d'Ivoire," by Lukas Meier, shows the consequences of French and Swiss scientific cooperation.

Even before Swiss scientists moved into the colonial world, a Swiss economic presence existed in the colonial market.

The influential nature of this involvement is the focus of Part II. In “Patriotic Bonds and the Danger of Estrangement: Swiss Networks in Colonial South-East Asia, 1850-1930,” Andreas Zangger provides an account comparing the involvement of Swiss merchants in South-East Asia with that of the Dutch, emphasizing maintaining Swiss cultural identity in the colonies. The sense of Swiss superiority over others in economic matters extended beyond colonial involvement as Angela Sanders shows in “‘Wonderland’ Peru: Migration and the Making of an Andean Switzerland.” The Swiss did not know how to react to India’s rise out of economic dependency as Rohit Jain discusses in “Bollywood, Chicken Curry—and IT: The Public Spectacle of the Indian Exotic, and Postcolonial Anxieties in Switzerland.”

The essays of Part III deal with more biographical examples of changing Swiss identity and participation globally. In “Becoming Imperial: A Swiss Woman’s Shifting Identity in British Southern Africa,” Ruramisai Charumbira discusses the experiences of Bertha Hardegger, a medical doctor who emigrated from Switzerland to Lesotho. The traditional Swiss view of themselves as the good European power due to the lack of colonial possessions continued into the Cold War as Patricia Purtschert points out in her discussion of Swiss mountain climbing in Asia “From ‘Native’ Alpine Guides to Foreign ‘Sahibs’ in the Himalayas: Swiss Identity Formation at the Moment of Decolonization.” As the world progressed to post-colonial climate, instead of economic or scientific involvement around the world, the 1960s and 1970s saw efforts by young Swiss, to help in the Third World here discussed by Patricia Hongler and Marina Lienhard in “Overburdened White Men (and Women): Ruptured Self-Images of Young Swiss in the ‘Third World’, 1940s-1970s.”

These altered perceptions, however, did not necessarily change the long held cultural beliefs of the Swiss themselves as the essays of Part IV clearly show. In “The Other Side of Internationalism: Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910-1920,” Harald Fischer-Tiné challenges the position of the Swiss as willing hosts to anti-imperialists during the 1920s. In “‘The Chinaman of old cannot be compared to the Chinaman of today’: Official Views of China and the Construction of Colonial Knowledge in Interwar Switzerland,” Ariane Knüsel continues the discussion in the difference between how the Swiss saw themselves in Switzerland versus the

reality of their global position. In “Glimpses into the Hearts of Whiteness: Institutions of Intimacy and the Desirable National,” Anne Lavanchy explores the exclusionary actions regarding acquiring Swiss citizenship taken by Swiss officials. In a brief afterword, Shalini Randeria provides an overview of the contributors’ arguments. She concurs with the opinion that the Swiss in reality are not and never were isolated and neutral. Ultimately, the volume on a whole fulfills the goal of showing just how much the Swiss were involved in the colonial enterprises even without its own colonies.

~ Katie Bruton, Independent Scholar