Global Circuits of Expertise and the Making of the Post-1945 World. Eastern European and Asian Perspectives

Place: New York City, USA

Organizers: Małgorzata Mazurek, Columbia University, Eugenia Y. Lean, Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University, James Mark, University of Exeter

Date: 29 – 30 April 2016

Author of the review:
Nguyen Vu Thuc Linh, History and Civilization Department, European University Institute, Florence, Italy

In many contexts – academic and non-academic, and in various parts of the world – there is still a widely held conviction that different forms of knowledge are incompatible with one another. It also often seems as if historians working in different subfields and regions do not see a way of passionately engaging with history that could be broadly, and problematically, categorized as 'non-Western.' What if we seriously ask ourselves: how much do we actually know about the transnational transfer of knowledge and its impact on the global production of science and expertise? What role did the Cold War play in those exchanges in the course of the 20th century? To what extent and under what conditions can one speak of a 'socialist science' as a distinct notion? In the spirit of global and transnational history, the two-day workshop *Global Circuits of Expertise and the Making of the Post-1945 World* at Columbia University provided a platform where these and related questions and assumptions were intensely discussed. The workshop managed to bring together, in a well-balanced manner, younger and more established scholars as well as insights from modern Eastern European and South Asian and Chinese history.

With Małgorzata Mazurek's paper on the presence of Polish economists in postcolonial India and Dongxin Zou's recounting of the history of Chinese medical aid to Algeria, the

first panel emphasized the relevance of concrete individual and group efforts of foreign experts in advancing knowledge production as well as changing concrete social practices. Mazurek's talk traced the centrality of scientific knowledge on the peasantry in past discussions on poverty and rural life. Polish scientists present in India in the 1950s keenly turned to interwar studies of the Polish peasantry which provided a major intellectual resource for thinking about and studying the agrarian Indian society. Interestingly, the differences in forms of cultural attachment to India between the Polish economists Oskar Lange and Michal Kalecki reinforced and simultaneously shaped their attitudes, and epistemic and intellectual dispositions. This, in turn, affected the depth of the economic reflection and expertise they acquired on Indian agrarian society. Moreover, Mazurek's paper reconstructed the surprising confluence of at times complementary views on rural poverty in India and Poland. In so doing, her talk aimed at demonstrating the utility of applying knowledge generated in Eastern Europe to Indian societies. Zou's paper emphasized the physical effort of transporting Chinese doctors and medical equipment to Algeria in the 1960s. As Zou argued, the presence of Chinese doctors in Algeria managed to popularize traditional Chinese medicine. One may say that the interaction between visiting doctors and the Algerian population was, if limited, a form of intercultural encounter as it resulted in a renewed interest in acupuncture with acupuncture clinics still to be found in today's Algeria. Clearly, this renewed form of knowledge combined insights from Chinese and Algerian biomedical experience. From a somewhat different angle, Arunabh Ghosh's paper examined the intersecting history of dam building in China and India. Ghosh convincingly showed that large dam building was no marginal matter for the history of Chinese and global modernization from the 1950s onwards. What is clear, however, is that the effort put into dam building and water harnessing was crucial to China's political ambition and utopian vision of a modern society. Ghosh's paper also revealed the immense scale of natural engineering that often goes beyond the 'good old' Western European image of modernization.

The second panel consisted of two papers. While Quinn Slobodian focused on the role of Eastern German films produced by DEFA in bringing closer and mediating socialist China to an East-German audience, Chris Chang discussed 'self-criticism' as an

ideological term and practice used by the Chinese communist party as a tool for bureaucratic discipline. In studying the unrealized *Yo-I* film, Slobodian provided valuable insights into the internal cultural policy between East Germany and China. Slobodian's paper also suggested alternative ways of engaging with Chinese society and culture based on a real experience of interaction and individualized relations to Chinese people as opposed to somewhat orientalising approaches. By taking as his topic history of cultural policy and film in the GDR, Slobodian implicitly asserted the significance of mass visual culture as a powerful platform for constructing and spreading the vision of socialist cosmopolitanism, global ambition and aspirational representations of transnational friendships. Chang's paper looked at how Chinese leaders turned to Bolshevik rhetoric, while adapting it, as a blueprint for the governance of the 'self' within the party structures. As Chang eloquently argued, self-criticism was originally a Leninist term which was used by Stalin as a slogan of openness while it de facto was a means of consolidating his power. With time, the term became a standardized, collective and non-hierarchical Soviet phrase used to address inner party problems. In the 1950s the term 'self-criticism' was implemented by the Chinese socialist government and became a coded and strategically appropriated means supporting the new political project. Used as a tool for mass mobilization, 'self-criticism' eventually became central to cadre training and, in this way, turned out to be key to what Chang calls 'bureaucratic ethics,' professionalism and governance.

The following panel brought together presentations by Sigrid Schmalzer who discussed the planting of Albanian olive trees in China and Fa-ti Fan who focused on the Chinese attempt to turn animals into scientific instruments. In 1964 ten thousand Albanian olive trees were sailed over to China as a gift. Drawing on Chinese sources, Schmalzer argued that the trees were more of a symbol of Sino-Albanian friendship than an example of a substantial agricultural and knowledge exchange between the countries. Despite interest in olive cultivation, Schmalzer suggested, the Chinese specialists doubted whether they could learn anything from the Albanians about agriculture. With this attitude, the recipients of the olive trees seemed to reproduce underlying evaluative assumptions regarding the state of Albianian agricultural knowledge. Fan's paper examined a trend in

scientific research focusing on the relations between animal behaviour and earthquake prediction in the 1960s and 1970s in China. In 1966 after the Xingtai earthquake, the first out of many stations for the observation of animal behaviour was founded in China. Fan identified the use of expertise on animals by seismologists as part of a broader state venture of disaster governance, particularly in the form of disaster defence programmes. Close and direct animal observation was hardly unique to professional scientific practice as it became part of an earthquake prediction campaign with thousands of observation points and mass participation. Interestingly, Fan's paper showed that as exploring animal behaviour became a wide-spread practice also among non-licensed observers, such as farmers, the meaning of expertise and professional knowledge production was not always necessarily fixed. The papers on this panel made an important contribution – namely that of showing that the history of science and knowledge unavoidably contains the history of failure as well as of intensified effort because newness and experimentation do not always end up being a success story. As Fan argued, scientists failed to establish sustained proofs for the link between animal behaviour and earthquake prediction, and as Schmalzer showed the presence of Albanian olive trees did not have profound implications for the agricultural knowledge in China. Schmalzer's paper also confronted the methodological question of how to examine and narrate the history of a phenomenon that took place but is not captured in the archives.

The final panel consisted of contributions by Viktor Petrov, Yakov Feygin and James Mark. Petrov's talk reconstructed the history of the Bulgarian electronics industry and policy as well as the industry's attempts to enter the global market in countries such as India in the 1970s and 1980s. This case was part of a bigger story of Cold War competition but also of exchanging ideas. As Petrov pointed out, central to the story is the profit-driven export of Bulgarian computers and information systems to a number of developing countries such as Egypt, Vietnam and China. The expanding export of computer and IT equipment also resulted in domestic computerisation and intellectual stimulation. Despite Petrov's focus on Bulgaria and in ways somewhat similar to Mazurek's paper, the study of Bulgarian-Indian connections and co-operation in general brought the key importance of India – as a rapidly changing society, as a competitive

market and as an interlocutor – in the history of 20th century scientific development to the fore. For Feygin, whose paper looked at the USSR's theory of development in the second half of the twentieth century, the global network of technocrats was central to the economic reforms. Feygin argued that the failure of *perestroika* arose from the neglect of monetary economics on the side of Soviet technocrats, economists and scientists. By the 1990s monetarist economics became the standard doctrine replacing the theory of technocracy from the 1960s. In the last talk of the workshop, Mark examined the growing interest among the Hungarian political and business elite in the remarkable economic performance of East Asia from the mid-1970s onwards. Regular meetings of economists proved central to the attempts to integrate with the global economy and reformist thought. It is worth noting that Hungary established relationships with South Korea partly because of South Korea's interest in Eastern Europe as an export market. Yet trade links were not the sole reason behind those relations as the latter were also informed by the leading Hungarian reformist economists' interest in the Korean economic experience. Additionally, in the eyes of Hungarian economists both countries shared a similar 'semi-peripherial' position in the world economy. Despite the presence of some critical voices, Hungary drew on South Korea's economic expertise as a template for economic success – a vision that lasted until the post-1989 era. By elucidating the connections between these two countries Mark's paper shed light on the role of business exchange as a space for integration and on the different, even surprising, genealogies of globalization.

The workshop concluded with a roundtable discussion between Paul Betts, Eugenia Lean, Elidor Mehili and Adam Tooze. Participants in the roundtable appreciated the unique opportunity of having historians of Eastern Europe talking with specialists on Asia. Among the issues raised during the roundtable and the following open discussion were: the role of political ideology in knowledge production; the meaning of socialist science and knowledge and the set of practices defining it; the shattering impact of the Cold War and the postcolonial context; and the centrality of bilateral and multilateral collaboration for knowledge production.

As the various transnational linkages discussed throughout the workshop made clear, the attempts to produce and exchange knowledge were often predicated on the assumption that science is not unquestionably limited to professional, elite and intellectual expertise. In these ways, the history of science and knowledge production establishes that expert knowledge can mean many things and encompass different forms of mass knowledge as well. Challenging the notion of science as limited to the established and institutionalized forms of knowledge production can potentially open up the vast field of the history of human creativity.

While recognizing the centrality of the state in creating the conditions for expertise circulation, the history of modernization and development should also acknowledge the significant role played by contingency. As fluctuation and contingency often coincide they also condition individual choices and, since the personal context matters enormously, in this way shape knowledge production. Another important question that was raised throughout the discussion revolves around the meaning of embodied knowledge in transferring expertise as presented in the case studies. The question of precisely how knowledge of individual biographies fits into the story of circulation and domestication of knowledge proves that personal experience is of great significance. Dealing with transnational and yet often 'European' histories implies being exposed to racialized and gendered bodies of experts as well as visual (mis)representations of the Other. It is important that historians of Europe in studying global networks of expertise do not to turn a blind eye to such processes of racialization. A related issue concerning the structural asymmetries in knowledge production then becomes unavoidable – who is teaching whom? Can the mutual learning process always be enacted in a balanced way? How do these questions fit into, or undermine, broader narratives of scientific as well as social progress?

Thanks to the impressive research presented at the conference and the rich discussions the papers triggered these questions will be on the agenda of future discussions about the history of knowledge, science and expertise. One can only hope that the Weatherhead East Asian Institute (directed by Eugenia Lean) and the Socialism Goes Global research

project (of which Małgorzata Mazurek, Paul Betts and James Mark are part) will continue to add complexity and depth to our understanding of globalization, socialism and the history of science and knowledge by exploring new analytical frameworks and perspectives.

Panel 1: Science and Decolonization
Chaired by Eugenia Lean (Columbia University)
Malgorzata Mazurek (Columbia University): *The Eastern European Peasant in Nehru's India: Transnational Debates on Rural Economies, 1930s-1960s*
Arunabh Ghosh (Harvard University): *Chinese Irrigation and Soil Conservancy through Indian Eyes, 1959*
Dongxin Zou (Columbia University): *Curing Ills with Socialist Medicine: China's Medical Missions in Algeria, 1963-1973*

Panel 2: Global Revolution: Circuits of Expertise and Techniques
Chaired by James Mark (Exeter University)
Quinn Slobodian (Wellesley College): *The Screen is Red: China and East Germany Make Films Together in 1950s*
Chris Chang (Columbia University): *Between Work and Struggle: The Varieties of Bolshevik "Self-Criticism" in Maoist China*

Panel 3: Politics of Exchange and Circulation
Chaired by Eugenia Lean (Columbia University)
Sigrid Schmalzer (University of Massachusetts, Amherst): *Tending the Trees of Friendship, Breeding New Knowledge at Home: The Case of the Albanian Olive Tree in China*
Fa-ti Fan (State University of New York, Binghamton): *Earthquakes, Disaster Governance, and Socialist China -- an International Perspective*

Panel 4: Late Socialist Reforms: Economics and Exchange

Chaired by Malgorzata Mazurek (Columbia University)

Victor Petrov (Columbia University): *Entangled Electronics: Bulgarian Computers and the Developing World as a Space of Exchange, 1967-1990*

Yakov Feygin (University of Pennsylvania): *The Political-Economy of Détente: Interdependence, Technocratic Internationalism and Formation of Perestroika Political Economy*

James Mark (Exeter University): *Between Eastern Europe and the 'East Asian Tigers': Hungary, South* Korea *and Economic Exchange in the Late Cold War*

Roundtable:

Paul Betts, Oxford University

Eugenia Lean, Columbia University

Elidor Mehilli, Hunter College

Adam Tooze, Columbia University