

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860–1930. American Encounters/Global Interactions*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, \$US 24.95 paper (978-0-8223-3928-1), \$US 89.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-3912-0).

This is a beautifully designed and exceptionally well-researched book on the early history of intercontinental cable and wireless communication. Although the book is part of a series devoted to historical scholarship on the “imposing global presence of the United States” (p. ix), the authors’ primary focus is on the period of commercial expansion of global cable communications that preceded the “American Century.” The outcome is a welcome reminder of the “relative scale of American state and corporate power” (p. 226) in the 19th century.

Winseck and Pike have framed their study as a revision of global media history — they downplay the contest of national states and imperialist rivalries in their account of the global expansion of the commercial cable infrastructure; they provide a longer historical view of media globalization by anchoring the process to political economic developments shaped by 19th century internationalism; and they draw instructive comparisons of media policies before and during the interwar years of political nationalism. Their work draws on a substantial amount of primary archival material to piece together the business histories of the major cable firms of the 19th century, their investments and financial backers, primary markets and business customers, and the territorial reach of their networks. The maps, photos, and sketches that illustrate the chapters are of high quality and add helpful, and sometimes humorous, detail to the text. All told, this is one of the best comparative histories of international communication in media studies.

Winseck and Pike take a “systems theoretic view” that allows them to grasp the multinational character of politico-economic arrangements that fostered the global media system prior to World War I (as opposed to the “realist” view that sees competition among superpowers as the defining international relationship). The result is a compelling narrative of how regional blocs (or regional empires of communication) formed out of a complex mix of cooperation, competition, and interdependence of financial, technological, and political powers. Their writing moves

easily from the intricacies of back room business deals to the drama of political debate in which national and international law and policy were hammered out. At the heart of this story is the tension between private commercial systems/business customers (which tended toward monopolization in the form of cartels) and reformers seeking to press these systems into public service (with arguments for the free flow of information used opportunistically by both sides). While attentive to the maneuvers of imperial aspirants, and the nationalistic fervor of some of the key players, Winseck and Pike document significant instances of what they call “shared hegemony” (p. xvii) and “private regimes of cooperation” (pp. 5, 341) in order to illustrate how national state governments and international capital worked together to create the global media system. Such capitalist internationalism would be significantly altered as the problem of nationality of ownership became a vital concern of governments, and a defining influence on national communication policy, in the 20th century.

What additional narratives could Winseck and Pike have drawn from their research? Two interrelated areas of historical study involve the roles of labour and colonialism. The “internationalization of control” (p. 341) was not just about systems and business, but also involved the control of raw materials as well as the expansion of and command over the international division of labour. The stories of workers who manufactured the cable, laboured on the ships, mined for copper, harvested gutta-percha (a kind of rubber that sheathed the copper wire in this period), etc., deserve a place of their own in this history. The interdependencies of colony and empire, of weak and powerful, would take this historical research into the painful settings of the plantations, mines, and factories that produced the hardware for the communication system. The environmental context of cable technology raises additional questions. What were the environmental demands and outcomes of cable manufacture, mining, undersea cabling, and so forth? These concluding points don’t undermine the masterful job that Winseck and Pike have done here, but they should be important topics for students and researchers seeking ways to further enhance our understanding of media history in this period.

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