
*Reviewed by* Elizabeth Stice (Palm Beach Atlantic University)  
*Published on* H-Albion (June, 2023)  
*Commissioned by* Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer Polytechnic)

Florian Wagner's *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893-1982* is a history of the International Colonial Institute (ICI) and the ways it “laid the groundwork for the structural and discursive dependence of the colonial world in the twentieth century” (p. 1). A somewhat forgotten organization, the ICI consisted of individual members from many Western countries who were considered colonial experts and worked to shape colonial policy internationally, by “designing it as a transnational and governmental project” (p. 3). Using governmentality in the Foucauldian sense, Wagner analyzes the idealism of the ICI and the technologies of empire its members promoted. Wagner demonstrates the long history of development and the distance between the legitimizing and real reasons behind ICI advocacy and actions using ICI publications and a wide range of archives. This book gives us a better understanding of colonialism and the forms it took in the twentieth century.

In many ways, the ICI appeared to be an idealistic or, at minimum, expertise-driven organization. It was interested more in members with colonial experience on the ground than with colonial officials in metropoles. It worked with, but outside of, governments, seeking to find and promote the “best” methods for nearly everything. On the whole, it promoted slow development with an emphasis on the importance of the indigenous worker and a certain amount of respect for indigenous customs and traditions. In some ways, the ICI appeared to be a friend to the colonized, by pushing back against assimilation, by promoting more colonial autonomy, and by seeking to eliminate ineffective governmental technologies.

Yet as Wagner convincingly shows, there was a meaningful gap between the given and actual justifications for the ICI. The promotion of colonial experts was as much or more about ensuring better compensation and retirement for colonial officials as it was about better governance. The resistance to assimilation often led to pushing for harder divisions between ethnic groups and/or segregation. Or the preservation of “indigenous” institutions could be for the uses of the state, as seen
in recent scholarship or in classic works like Mul-tatuli’s *Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* (1860). *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire* outlines the history of development and the links between twentieth-century and late nineteenth-century policy. This book also demonstrates that the ICI was so committed to its notions of expertise and governance that they found them adaptable to any environment—the French Empire, the proposed fascist Eurafrika, or the decolonized “Third World.” As Wagner concludes, “historians should thus follow the postcolonial mission to scrutinize seemingly liberal and progressive phenomena in history for underlying colonialist structures” (p. 350).

One thing this book does exceptionally well is help us see beyond the state. Empires are known to be bigger than nations, but very often academics still fall into the habit of discussing empires along national lines and according to country policies. That can result in repetitive comparison projects. And it can keep the focus on some of the larger and longer lasting empires of the twentieth century—the British and the French. This book helps us see the colonial project as it was—international. And it helps us understand how policy was shaped alongside and outside of states.

*Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire* effectively highlights the global importance of smaller empires and specific technologies of empire. For example, chapter 3 explains the significance of the Dutch model as a gold standard among colonial empires. Not only does Wagner remind us that scale is not always the best indicator of significance, but he also explores the ways the Dutch reputation seemed to rest on its “ethical policy” yet rested more firmly on the foundation of profit. Specific technologies of empire are also covered in this book. Chapter 4 highlights the “Buitenzorg myth”: the lore of progress surrounding the Dutch agronomic lab in Java. The belief in Buitenzorg shaped agricultural policy in many colonies. In chapter 8, Wagner explains the significance of the Fokon’olona model of cooperative societies in Madagascar. This kind of work helps us to better understand how empires actually functioned and how their myths were sustained.

The breadth of this book is both a strength and a weakness. *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire* truly does cover 1893-1982. Wagner takes us through the twentieth century and the ICI transition in 1949 to become the INCIDI (International Institute of Differing Civilizations) and then into the postcolonial era. Hundreds of significant figures are mentioned by name and numerous approaches to colonialism are explored, and it is little wonder that there are 356 pages of text before the notes or index. The grand scope allows Wagner to make effective arguments about continuity and adaptability in colonial approaches and to reach his ultimate conclusion that “colonialism is not reformable” (p. 350).

Yet the breadth sometimes denies us full exploration of an interesting topic. It seems it would have been possible to expand some chapters into their own books. For example, the chapter involving cooperative societies is very interesting and could have easily merited more pages. The chapter does touch on principles underlying cooperative societies, their use by governments, and the gap between what they seemed to be and what they were. But it would have also been interesting to learn more about the relationship between cooperative societies and empire marketing boards, especially considering that the author got feedback from Fred Cooper and is clearly familiar with his work. Hearing more from people affected by cooperative societies would have likely strengthened the arguments.

The book’s density helps it keep pace with the broad scope, but at times readers would have benefited from seeing more of the author’s analytic process. Conclusions are drawn from ICI publications, but they are rarely directly quoted. More
quotes would have made clear how Wagner interpreted sources. The chapters involving fascism and the 1938 Volta Conference especially would have benefited from more direct quotes, as Wagner attempts to describe “the ICI’s turn to fascism in the 1930s” (p. 212). The ICI had hundreds of members. Some were fascist in ways that historians of fascism would recognize, but others only joined forces with fascists or found their views compatible with fascism when it came to Eurafrica or a certain type of multiculturalism—as Wagner himself suggests. Wagner indicates the nuance but does not have space to fully develop it. Germans participated in this era of the ICI, but it seems that the form of fascist empire largely discussed at and after the Volta Conference and the vision of Eurafrica were almost exclusively Italian, with little relation to the actions of the Third Reich in eastern Europe. More quotes from ICI members would have been helpful in explaining this scenario, as would more pages of exploration generally. Here the blessing and the curse of the scope is clear: it acquaints us with the often-forgotten Volta Conference and the links between ICI philosophy and fascist Eurafrica but does not allow us space to fully understand the relationship between various ICI members and fascism as a distinct political philosophy (and the relationships with variants of fascism).

This book is a good complement to others that explore the connection between knowledge and power, such as Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (1996) by Bernard Cohn. Throughout, Wagner explains how colonial experts redefined indigenous cultures and institutions as they studied and described them. The new definitions were then put to use in government structures by colonial officials. Wagner highlights this in his chapter on the “the Adatization of Islamic law” and in specific examples, such as government policies in India with regard to nidhis (mutual benefit societies). Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire helps us understand the relationship between colonial knowledge and international organizations.

In some ways, an interesting parallel publication is When McKinsey Comes to Town: The Hidden Influence of the World’s Most Powerful Consulting Firm (2022) by Walt Bogdanich and Michael Forsythe. That book reveals many of the negative effects and large expenses that have accompanied McKinsey’s work. McKinsey consultants, like many ICI members, are often initially drawn in by idealism, the opportunity to solve problems on a grand scale, and the chance to develop or use specific skills. McKinsey promises expertise and wealth, but, at the end of the day, according to the authors, its experts “mainly serve to legitimize the goals of their clients.”[1] The same was true for ICI members, who may have considered themselves to be smarter or more humane in their colonialism than many of their governments but who, ultimately, still served to legitimize colonialism. For all their insistence on greater colonial autonomy, most ICI members were resisters of actual independence.

Both the ICI and McKinsey relate to the notion of “technocratic internationalism” and the priority given to perceived expertise. In the name of cutting costs and improving efficiency, McKinsey solves some problems, but it also charges millions of dollars and sometimes leaves organizations with new problems. In the name of slow and steady development and sympathy with the colonized, ICI members found themselves promoting faulty economic approaches and even denying the representativeness of indigenous people who tried to speak and advocate for themselves. ICI members may have sometimes believed that they were acting based on rational approaches and principles, but they were more often acting on the basis of their status and from limited perspectives. They were colonial experts who could not imagine themselves ever irrelevant to colonial places. Their development schemes and projects continued after colonialism ended, without interruption.
As the authors of *When McKinsey Comes to Town* suggest, there are certain projects that cannot earn affirmation. Wagner reminds his readers, “colonialism is not reformable” (p. 350).

Those who study empires or development will find this history of the ICI and international governmentality to be insightful and a worthwhile contribution. Undergraduates or those with limited existing knowledge might find it a challenging read. However, the attention to governmentality and technologies of governance is a good model and a welcome approach that expands the utility of the book. We should more often think about empire in this way, and those concerned with governmentality and the role of experts generally will find this book very interesting even if they are less familiar with empires and colonialism. This book effectively gets beyond a comparative approach to offer us a history of the ICI and colonialism that is transnational, as the ICI hoped to be. In so doing, it should be of use to many people.

Note


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58921

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.