PROJECT MUSE®

Colonialists in the Machine: Maria Paula Diogo and Dirk van
Laak, *Europeans Globalizing*
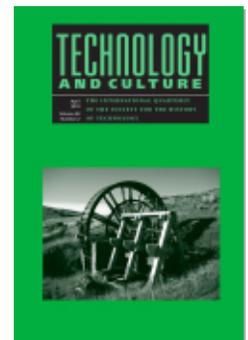
Derek W. Vaillant

➡ *For additional information about this article*
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/726944

Colonialists in the Machine

Maria Paula Diogo and Dirk van Laak, *Europeans Globalizing*

DEREK W. VAILLANT

Europeans Globalizing: Mapping, Exploiting, Exchanging, by Maria Paula Diogo and Dirk van Laak (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 352 pp., hardcover $95) marks the sixth volume of *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850–2000* edited by Johan Schot and Phil Scranton. The series is the proud legacy of the European Science Foundation's "Inventing Europe" collaborative research initiative and the Foundation for the History of Technology's "Tensions of Europe" project. Companion volumes have studied consumers of technology, technical and scientific elites, system-builders, norms and standards of technological innovation, and communication and information technologies, specifically media and telecommunications and computers. Here, the authors ambitiously engage the nature of European and non-European relations in the colonial and postcolonial eras through the "lens of technology." Disclaiming any attempt at grand synthesis or encyclopedic comprehensiveness, this book draws on selected works by established European and U.S. scholars to offer thematic interpretation of patterns of historical circulation and interaction among Europeans, non-Europeans, and the technological artifacts and processes that connected spaces, places, and people in reflexive and asymmetrical relations in the age of empire, colonialism, and since.

Between 1850 and 2000, Europe and European identity assumed a distinctive modern, technologically inflected form: "The measure of civilization was transferred from the sphere of the sacred to the profane, to the material world of science and technology" (p. 4). From this assertion, the authors proceed to describe a "civilizational" ensemble of technological innovations, systems, and ways of knowing that helped propel nineteenth-century European colonialism and ongoing forms of exploitation of non-

Derek W. Vaillant is a professor of communication studies and an affiliated professor of history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Western peoples and resources across the twentieth century. Maintaining an even tone, *Europeans Globalizing* is nevertheless a damning reminder of technology's ubiquity in the scarring global processes of warfare and imperialism, colonial domination, and environmental despoliation whose legacies shape the world today. From the Arctic to the Far East to Africa, the "technologically-informed [*sic*] interactions" between Europeans and global others may have involved "give and take" in certain instances, but also staggering amounts of violence, human suffering, injustice, and planetary destruction. The authors keep the contentious history of European expansion, colonialism, and postcolonial domination in the background while coolly training the reader's attention on technology's changing place(s) in the processes, discourses, and colonial and postcolonial arrangements that shaped and conjoined Europeans and non-Europeans.

Seven chapters in loose chronological order chart the rise (and decline) of Europe's technological power. *Mapping and Being Mapped* introduces the pre-1850 phase of European "observation, collections, and schematization of near and distant places" (p. 20) that rationalized European attitudes of entitlement, superiority, and mission and sustained technological expansion and exploitation elsewhere. Subsequent chapters consider the era of "High Imperialism" (1850–1945) in which exploitative relations prevailed between Europe, Asia, Africa and, to a lesser extent, the Near East and the Arctic, yielding under the weight of world wars, American ascendance, Cold War politics, and nationalist revolutions to technologically enhanced "exchange relations" (1920–2000) that skewed toward U.S. technological advantage through the "Digital Revolution" (1990–2000).

Scrambling for Eurafrica shows the European powers jockeying for technical, diplomatic, and cultural advantage to fuse two continents by railway. *From the Raj to the Yellow Peril* explores the contingencies and culturally specific factors that produced starkly different reactions in India, China, and Japan to claims of European "technological superiority." These chapters make the point that when possible, non-Europeans did more than react to Euro-technical advances: they actively "absorbed, creatively adapted, or declined" (p. 20) them as they sought tolerable forms of coexistence with Europe and later, the United States. While all chapters are informative and well written, there is some conceptual drift within them. At times, the quick cuts from place to place and time to time, as well as the multivectored analysis, test the reader's patience. The discussion alights on fascinating topic after topic, but there's not always enough time or space to flesh out the argument or to assess the connections that have been made along the way. Yet even amid moments of occasional disorientation, such as in the fascinating but murky discussion of the Ottoman Empire and Russia's and the former Soviet Union's oblique ties to Europe (*Europe's Significant Others*), the approach leaves the reader stimulated and eager to consult the bibliography for further reading.

The "Making Europe" project is a landmark achievement that has produced outstanding resources for scholars and students. The authors of *Europeans Globalizing* should be hailed for their willingness to invest the intellectual labor to wrestle a vast, unwieldy, and contentious subject area into a single volume. The authors successfully demonstrate how transnational, multi-sited dynamics and specificities can enrich the writing of global technological history. Students and general readers will appreciate the jargon-free prose and scholars will find much that is left out, but also ample food for thought thanks to the volume's illuminating array of case studies and intriguing juxtapositions. Finally, in an era of shrinking fonts and overcrowded pages, it should be celebrated that *Europeans Globalizing* is elegantly designed with quality paper stock and well chosen and reproduced photographs, images, and maps.

ESSAY

REVIEW