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The Cultural History of Empire.

An Interview with Professor Antonella Romano (EUI) and Professor Jorge Flores (EUI), by Moritz von Brescius

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(von Brescius): *Before we turn to the specificities of 'cultural histories of empire,' it seems first of all mandatory to understand why the study of empires in general has seen such a sharp increase since the 1970s – a time in which (according to Peter J. Marshall) the 'study of British imperial history, like the British empire itself, was on its last legs.' Therefore, the question arises: what driving forces can be detected behind this strong reinvigoration of imperial studies (not limited to the British Empire) that we are experiencing today?*

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(Flores): I think Peter Marshall is right but he may be referring to the old imperial history that faded away together with the very extinction of European empires themselves. Today, historians have a plethora of agendas at their disposal to engage with imperial history in new and challenging ways. They may be interested in understanding the European empires in a comparative perspective, or to contrast such structures with other imperial models, from the last Islamic Empires (Ottomans, Safavids, Mughals) to Ming-Qing China. The complex threads between "colonies" and metropoles also need to be readdressed, while gender imperial history is a booming field. European interactions with extra-European societies (from economy to religion to knowledge systems) constitute a nodal point of imperial studies today. The same holds true for material culture and globalized commodities. One may also intertwine imperial history and maritime history and, last but not least, empires are at the core of the current debates about global history and world history, entangled histories and the origins of globalization.

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It is possible nowadays to study the European empires without having to "live" with them. Notwithstanding, I am certain that the renewed existence in a North-American empire, together with a general interest for things global, helped shaping new markets and audiences for books on empires penned by prominent scholars. John Darwin's *After Tamerlane. The Global History of Empire after 1405* (2008), as well as Jane Burbank's and Frederick Cooper's *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (2010) are cases in point, not to mention the polemic work by Niall Ferguson, *Empire: Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (2004).

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(von Brescius): *How does this revival of imperial and colonial histories relate to the skyrocketing cross-disciplinary interest in the history of 'globalisation' that can be detected since the 1990s? Are these different fields complementary or competitive?*

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(Romano): The relationship between imperial/colonial history and the history of globalisation is mainly due to the spatial expansion of some empires and, more specifically, to the overseas European ones: the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, first, and then the French and the British expanded beyond continents and oceans and connected diverse areas on a global scale. These fields are nevertheless independent from each other: the history of globalisation can use the imperial or colonial perspective as a choice for the sake of the research. I am not sure that all the global histories we wish to write have to be post-colonial in their approach. On the other hand, the global perspective is not systematically present in imperial or colonial history: if we pay attention to the development of "areas studies", although they have been developing differently in the countries where they took place, we are forced to recognise that they are still extremely lively. An interesting case study is provided by the Chinese example, as well as by the current works devoted to the Spanish empire.

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(von Brescius): *The ongoing 'global turn' that is shaping research interests and resources in history departments around the world has led to a reconsideration of many established certainties about European exceptionalism. Historical fields that have been traditionally studied within a Eurocentric framework are now increasingly being examined from a global perspective and notions of one-way cultural diffusion from Europe 'to the world' have come under fierce criticism. One eminent example is the recent interest in the global history of the 'Enlightenment' as a phenomenon whose historical trajectory was, so it is argued, never confined to European societies. How do you see the role of the cultural history of empire within these new avenues of research? To what degree do empires emerge as 'enabling mechanisms' of cultural transfers not only from the European imperial metropole to the periphery but also vice versa?*

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(Romano): The first point to remember is that the critique of European exceptionalism has roots other than the "global turn." One of its first expressions can be found together with the so-called "discovery of the new world" among European thinkers themselves: the sceptical philosophical school in European history of thought has represented a radical criticism toward colonisation and empires. Thus, contrary to Said's point, I would also endorse the historical dimension of the critique to European exceptionalism, as expressed by Las Casas, Montaigne, Sahagún or Montesquieu and Diderot. All too often the early modern period has been analysed through a nineteenth-century lens. On the one hand, the Renaissance, as recently recalled by Jack Goody, was not "one" and European-based, but "many"; and the richness of the exchanges, particularly cultural, between imperial states around the globe was multi-focused and multi-oriented. On the other hand, I would invite caution in endorsing too easily the definition of "global Enlightenment", the risk being to essentialize the Enlightenment phenomenon itself, by losing both the object of which we speak – what is Enlightenment? – and its chronology – when does it take place? In a historiographical perspective, other roots of the critique to European exceptionalism may also be identified, such as the post-colonial ones, through the huge variety of its expressions since F. Fanon or the subalternists.

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Moreover, I am a bit sceptical about the concept of "cultural transfer", which has been developed in order to analyse centre/periphery relations within the European framework. The

point is that such a concept is itself based on a diffusionist perspective toward cultural processes and exchanges: as a result, it offers the strongest analytical tool to support Eurocentrism and European exceptionalism. The most challenging criticisms towards this model (through the sophisticated concepts of "histoire croisée" or "connected history") have been developed within the framework of research devoted to the cultural history of empires. And, fortunately, these works have provided us with other models, most of which (with the help of sociological or anthropological concepts) pinpoint negotiations or asymmetrical relations as the key processes to be taken under consideration. This is what makes us move on from the transfers. The most recent works in the history of science have paid attention to circulations of men and goods as processes in need of other (heuristic) tools to challenge transfers.

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(von Brescius): *How has your own research agenda changed under these recent developments in historical scholarship? Now that simple diffusionist models of historical explanation have been discredited, what new analytical tools do you consider useful in tracing back the entangled histories of Europe and her overseas colonies in the early modern and modern period?*

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(Flores): Actually, I have been lucky enough since my early steps in the profession to learn from, and work with, historians who strongly opposed the diffusionist approach. People like Luís Filipe Thomaz (Lisbon), the late Denys Lombard (Paris), and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (now at the UCLA), among others, taught me to think critically about European exceptionalism. I was impelled to question Eurocentric views of the pre-modern period, while extensively reading about societies not necessarily linked to the history of "Western Civilization" and its early modern Empires.

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Recent developments in historical scholarship, as well as professional contact with historians both in North America and Europe with rather different profiles and research agendas, made me think in a more global way as far as teaching and publishing are concerned. I have become gradually more interested in the early modern world as such, and less concerned with fixed geographical areas of expertise. I think less about centres and peripheries and more in terms of multiple poles. I am sceptical about rigid divides between colonizer and colonized and more keen to explore "middle grounds" and mechanisms of cultural transfer. Instead of "overseas colonies", one should look at complex overseas societies made of individuals and groups displaying rather composite identities. Concurrently, historical sources have to be read and re-read through different lenses.

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(von Brescius): *Power relations between the colonizer and the colonized seem to have been constantly negotiated. How can a cultural history of imperialism reveal this process and expand on the role of hierarchies, both real and symbolic, in cross-cultural encounters?*

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(Romano): I would first say that the relations between the colonizers and the colonized have increasingly been approached in terms of negotiations, a way of challenging the overly simplistic view of power-based relations, where the agency of the colonized was reduced to submission: in other words, to passive acceptance. As early as the 1920s, Antonio Gramsci

developed the concept of subaltern culture within the framework of a post-Marxist understanding of Mediterranean lower class culture. In line with this analysis, a more dialectic view of the colonized and the colonizers has been developed since the 1970s in the specific context of India and other contexts, such as Latin America. In the case of Brazil, an approach, more focused on slavery culture, following the pioneering work by Gilberto Freire, has been crucial in order to enrich the analysis of power relations in a colonial context. In the field of the history of science, interesting cases have recently been provided by scholars working on "native medicine", which show how a local medical knowledge might become central to the European Enlightenment medical debate. While these works do not claim to outline a global Enlightenment as such, they make it clear that this phenomenon cannot be understood if isolated and confined to Europe.

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This is just to remind ourselves that the current cultural history of imperialism has its own roots in very different and rich historiographical traditions. The attention paid to culture with regard to these power relations has been crucial in introducing new research topics about "native cultures" (including medicine, beliefs and cosmologies) and the appeal, interest and fascination they have provoked in the colonizers, not only imposing their own concepts, technologies or representations (both real and symbolic), but also translating, adapting and using them within an asymmetrical framework of exchange. The need for natives' support in the establishment of the colonial order, the importance of secondary characters as the "go-between" or the translators, the relevance of gendered relations are now part of our agendas.

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(von Brescius): *Edward Said's highly influential work on Western 'Orientalism' has been both widely acclaimed and fiercely debated since its publication in 1978. What new understandings have emerged in recent years on the complex nature of travel literature, which is increasingly not seen as a mere reproduction of imperial mindsets, but as works where different cosmologies and types of knowledge (both European and indigenous) are inextricably interwoven?*

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(Flores): The pros and cons of *Orientalism* have been explored *ad nauseam* and maybe it is time to simply move on! Said – and he acknowledges this – was mainly concerned with the Middle East and part of the Muslim World, French and British Orientalism(s), and the modern period. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Portuguese representations of China and Japan, to pick only one among many possible exceptions, do not necessarily fit in the argument. Then we have to consider the puzzling nature of the texts at stake. Today we know that European imperial travel accounts, as well as other related materials, are extremely diverse where time and place are concerned and constitute rather complex realities. One text may be European, native and "hybrid" at the same time. Indigenous knowledge is often embedded and frequently shapes European (written and pictorial) representations of the "Other", which poses problems to the Saidian theory. His rigid distinction of "pure" knowledge and political knowledge is also problematic, in my opinion. Moreover, Said has conceived both the European and the "Other" as monolithic blocks, the "Other" being a passive entity with no agency. We now think less and less in terms of binaries. To "essentialize" the divide between "us" and "them", between the West and the rest, is to deny the importance of commensurability and to simplify the connections between different cultures and societies. Finally, Europeans were certainly not the only ones with the ability to conceive the "Other". What sense can one make of the Intra-Asian travels and visions recently studied by Muzaffar

Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (*Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800, 2007*)? How should we deal with Ottoman views of the early modern world, stretching from Mexico to the Southeast Asian sultanate of Aceh?

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(von Brescius): *The historian Daniel Headrick has produced a number of works on the role of improved medical knowledge and of the new transportation and communication technologies of the industrial age for different 'stages' of European imperialism in the last five centuries.*[1] *What are the potential analytical problems of such a 'technological determinism' in explaining the history of imperialism, and how does it relate to cultural studies of the subject?*

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(Romano): The first problem I see in this kind of approach has to do with the kind of mystification / mythisation of the "West", where the focus on "machines" underestimates the part played by labour forces in the implementation of a successful technological history. As a result, the human cost of such a development, either in Europe or outside of Europe, may be easily put to one side. The story offered following such a line of analysis is a large-scale narrative, where power relations disappear in front of the constraints of environment and the necessity of "improvement".

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His last book especially is based on the westerners' agency: they are represented as the only ones who have to struggle with the environment and difficult natural conditions (so where are the sophisticated hydraulic technologies of Muslim or Asian societies which have to be investigated within a completely different chronological framework than the one normally used by historians of technology?); they are the only ones to move and conquer non-European spaces, when the Asian 17th century is, for instance, over-determined by the Manchu conquest of China, a nomadic empire winning against an administration-state based empire …

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(von Brescius): *What role does the material culture of empire play in re-interpreting the cultural dimensions of imperialism? How do you make use in your own research of objects as carriers of knowledge and as cultural artefacts of European and non-European societies?*

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(Flores): It is my view that material culture, namely the circulation of objects between different cultural zones, represents a crucial dimension of cross-cultural exchange in the early modern world. Diplomacy depended on gift-giving; missionaries, merchants, officials and a multitude of anonymous people have made objects move intensively around the world since the 1400s. Such artefacts were often transformed in the process and it is clear that they were perceived in different forms by different people. We "see" them today in letters, reports, inventories and chronicles, and it is difficult to do a social and cultural history of empires without considering them. Many are today housed in museums and private

[1] See his latest work that also partly considers the limitations of superior technologies for Western expansion in specific environments: Daniel Headrick: *Power Over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present* (Princeton, 2010).

collections, adding a three-dimensional "flavour" to our knowledge of the pre-modern and modern eras.

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Until a couple of decades ago, there was a clear divide between historians on the one hand, and art historians and museum curators on the other. The connection was difficult since a "common ground" was lacking on how to "look" at objects and "read" written sources about them. The gap has been gradually bridged and major international exhibitions – from "Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500-1800" (Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2004) to "Encompassing the Globe. Portugal and the World in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2007), to only name a couple – clearly prove it. I myself had that gratifying experience when co-curating in 2004 an exhibition called "Goa and the Great Mughal" for the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon.

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(von Brescius): *Historians are becoming increasingly willing to draw on visual material, not least with regard to the 'imperial imagination' of empire. What analytical benefits, but also potential pitfalls do you see in drawing on this specific type of primary evidence?*

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(Flores): Following my previous answer, I find the analysis of images a crucial component of imperial history, one that has considerably benefited from the consolidation of visual studies. Paintings, engravings and drawings are no longer seen as a simple ornament to a given scholarly piece. They are at the core of the research on topics such as cross-cultural representations, visual politics, geographical discourses and ethnographical perceptions. We know today, thanks to the works of Peter Mason and others, that images have a life, an unpredictable life of their own. The potential dangers of drawing on images are either to isolate them from the respective context or to neglect their active dialogue with other contemporary sources, from simple administrative documents to theatre plays. One should also be aware of the complexity of these materials regarding authorship, production, circulation and reception. In *The Mapping of New Spain* (2000), for example, Barbara Mundy has shown how "colonial cartography" is a challenging field of study. On a similar vein, we know that drawing and engraving the very same "colonial scene" often resulted in rather different "scenes". The Italian historian, Michele Bernardini, addressed this issue by comparing manuscript and printed visual materials associated with the seventeenth-century Indo-Persian travels of Boulaye le Gouz.

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(von Brescius): *To what extent do cultural historians of empire have to push for interdisciplinary collaborations to fully use the available source material in order to better understand the complex cultural ramifications of empires both in Europe and in the colonial sphere?*

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(Flores): History should be open to the "contamination" of neighbouring disciplines. This is one of the major lessons conveyed by the "founding fathers" of the *Annales* School, who systematically fostered the ties between history and social sciences. The ways in which one chooses to pursue collaborative work vary from the personal and professional profile of a given historian to the institutional frameworks at stake, be it in Europe, the United States or any other part of the world.

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Imperial history today represents a special case in point due to the variety of cultural zones at stake, as well as the diversity of sources and respective languages involved. Cultural historians of empire may need to develop philological skills when studying certain texts. Art history, visual culture, literary studies, anthropology, human geography and religious studies undoubtedly constitute related knowledge and offer alternative methodologies. Let me give a couple of examples drawing from my own experience. The study of the multiple dimensions of conversion to Catholicism in early modern Sri Lanka becomes far more sophisticated when the "colonial historian" meets the Buddhist scholar. Likewise, and besides dialoguing with translation studies, to elaborate on the profile and the professional skills of the brahmins working in seventeenth-century Portuguese Goa as interpreters means to engage with debates which are at the core of the research agenda of many South Asianists. If we turn our eyes to the South Atlantic Ocean in the same period, we have to recognize that the contribution by anthropologists has been crucial to understand European-native interactions both in Congo and Brazil.

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(von Brescius): *What link do you detect between processes of identity formation within imperial contexts and the history of anthropology and discourses of racial differences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, hence a period in which we can see a shift from a cultural to a more scientific/biological explanation of racial differences and hierarchies?*

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(Romano): This is a complex question, where imperial history is not necessarily central: or to say it better, this is a typical example where the shift of paradigm from a culturally based definition of identity to a biologically based approach has to be seen as the result of a process dealing with Europe and non-Europe together. The development of physical anthropology is rooted in both the representation of the lower ranks within Europe and the peoples outside: the "discovery" of the working class in Britain at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, for instance, or of the peasants of the Scottish Highlands and Ireland, is based on a portrayal of their physical features (including the colour of their skin, defined as dark), and "wild" manners, which overlap with the description of American Indians. In other words, the British Empire is construed in parallel within and outside Europe during the 18th century, together with a hierarchy of peoples/races, as an increasing literature is demonstrating. As well as promoting voyages around the world, the Enlightenment triggered the "travels" of inquiry within the European world (the Habsburg Empire offers a good example of this). At the same time, the vocabulary and conceptual framework at work were the same: the categories of the "savage" and the "barbarian" were used both to describe historically and geographically distant peoples, and the conditions of the poorest social classes in Europe. In this sense, the imperial context – which is never only a "context" – offers the broadest field in which to analyse the shaping of identities, and in which to see the "national identity" as the invention of a tradition.

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(von Brescius): *Since religious matters often deeply shaped societies and their perceptions of foreign cultures, how would you situate religious studies within the broader field of imperial histories?*

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(Romano): In order to link this answer to the previous point, I would like to stress that, in the early modern period, the question of "racial otherness" was generally secondary to that of "pagan otherness", and comparative religion was the first goal in describing the peoples of the earth. As Colin Kidd has put it, "Although many social and cultural factors have contributed significantly to western constructions of race, scripture has been for much of the early modern and modern eras the primary cultural influence of forging races. 'Race-as-theology' should be an important constituent of the humanistic study of racial constructs alongside accounts of 'race-as-biology', 'race-as-ethnicity', and 'race-as-class or caste'" (The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000 Cambridge 2006, 19). I think this is a point to think about.

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Having said this, here I would rather deal with the historiographical "boom" we can observe in the production of works related to missions and missionaries within a global context or as a framework to understand the so-called "first globalization". Previous to this switch, there has been a very rich and variegated amount of works dealing with the first large-scale intent of "evangelisation", the Spaniard experience in the New World. Some of these works focused on the evangelizer side (connecting it, or not, to the more general process of colonization); others, influenced by anthropological approaches, dedicated most of their enquiries to the evangelized people. Independently of the approach, these works have all emphasized the crucial importance of religious encounter in the more general understanding of cross-cultural exchanges. Another point has to be recalled: in search of sources through which to analyze the "contact", some historians, and certainly an increasing number, have looked at the missionary writings not only as relevant for an anthropological approach, but also as material in which to look for "natives' voices".

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Following this line, some works have been able to offer insightful analyses about the epistemological foundations of history; while other works have simply treated these materials as the "first anthropological or ethnographical accounts" of areas with no written cultures. From a more intellectual history perspective, the theological concepts underpinning the evangelizers'/colonizers' policy have also been widely discussed. It is worth noting that this historiography of mission has been more and more reframed and its research agenda redesigned, thanks to the interest developed by historians of science (missionary reports, books or works in the field having turned into relevant contributions toward natural history, medicine, humankind…). With regard to the Spanish empire, such research could easily fit into an agenda where the agency, the chronology, as well as the conceptual core of the scientific revolution had to be revisited in order to include the Catholic world, and the Iberians beyond the black legend inherited from the Enlightenment. Many works have recently contributed to the reassessment of the Jesuits or of the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith, for instance, as part of the global players in the early modern period. More recently, similar attention has been given to Protestant missions, for later periods and other areas of the world, and other empires.

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Having said that, the analytical framework provided by imperial history has also proved to be useful to challenge the definitions and categories of "religious studies". What I mean here is that looking at "religious encounters" through the lens of empire studies allows European historians to develop a non-Eurocentric analysis of "religion" and of Christian religions, seen as cosmologies among other non-European cosmologies: the tools we may use in

understanding how missionaries or theologians constantly shape the boundaries between faith and superstition, reason and belief, as soon as they look at the "other" can also be used, as Lahontan did at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in order to analyse Catholicism, for instance, as a set of superstitions, seen from other perspectives. In other words, the big divide between secular and religious, which constitutes the epistemological pillar of religious studies and is still endorsed, in social sciences, as the major asset of modern societies, can be historicized and criticized.

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(von Brescius): *In view of the fact that the 'new imperial history' has been criticised as focussing too exclusively on identities and 'representations' at the expense of the economic dimensions of imperialism, what is your position on the question whether the cultural studies of empire should always also reflect on, and take seriously, its political and commercial aspects?*

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(Flores): I fully agree with such criticism. To begin with, the focus on representations, perceptions and visions does not necessarily have to constitute the monopoly of literary scholars and postcolonial studies. One should not detach the knowledge of such phenomena from specific contexts and concrete circumstances. "Empirical" work is very much needed in order to understand the balance between representation and reality or the interplay of cultural images and, say, political developments. The same applies to the study of identities in an overseas and colonial setting, which I see as being deeply rooted in social history. That is, in my view, the only way to understand Mediterranean renegades, Latin American Creoles or "White Mughals" (W. Dalrymple), for example.

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Secondly, cultural studies of empire cannot neglect the ways in which cultural history is now interwoven with economic history. Since Philip Curtin's *Cross-cultural Trade* (1984), historians have been exploring this connection in multiple ways, the current interest on the social and cultural history of commodities being just one possible avenue of research. In a similar fashion, it is important to underline the link between the history of science and the world of early modern trade – as Harold Cook did for the "Dutch Golden Age" in his *Matters of Exchange* (2007) –, or to acknowledge the existence of a strong cultural component concerning the study of European imperial diplomacy.

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(von Brescius): *Professor Romano, Professor Flores, thank you both very much for this interview.*

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