Engineering Modernity, Nationalism, and Colonialism

Mara Dicenta
Science and Technology Studies
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy (NY)
dicenm@rpi.edu

The institutionalization of science came together with the solidification of the modern State as legitimate actors for organizing knowledge and governance throughout the 19th century (Foucault, 2003, 2009). Along with an imperialist drive, States aimed to reach every realm of life within and across borders to expand and secure its own interests. Knowing populations, organisms, and geographies became the path for success and stability while structuring an archaeology of knowledge that enabled governments to unfold regulations to, ultimately, optimize its populations and territories. Since then, rights´ struggles became inseparable from the scientific knowledges of the human as a biological, psychological, or ecological domain. At that time, the process of civilizing justified a mode of doing colonial science, one that was validated through the inferiorization of Others (peoples, lands, epistemologies). At that time, scientists involved in exploring, taxonomizing, and doing cartographies, participated in mapping and uncovering the world (Giucci, 2014). Classifying came along with drawings and other representation techniques that enacted ideals, hierarchies, and politics. How did these forms of ordering the world were accompanied by aesthetic values that helped reconfigure societies, natures, landscapes, and modes of coexistence? What were the tastes of scientific colonialism? Which symbolic species, lands, or humans composed the narratives and devices (coins, flags) of expansionism?

An intensification of State planification through science marked the beginning of the 20th century. The Second Industrial Revolution and the World Wars motivated narrower ties between Science, Industry, and the State in a period when economics was dominated by the import-export paradigm. From right to left nationalist ideologies, Nations at that time centered science as a way to actively engineer its societies, landscapes, and productivity (Scott, 1998: 5). From Argentina to the URSS, Germany and the US, engineers and dams became figures of modernity. At the same time, introduction and experimentation of species became normalized as a vehicle for engineering nature and society and plants, seeds, and animals participated in nationalist projects as agents of modernity. However, those state-planned utopian engineering projects were also accompanied by failures due to the combination of an administrative management of nature and society, a high modernist ideology, utopic technological optimism, authoritarian methods, and disavowal of local histories (Scott, 1998). Besides, failures took particular forms in Southernized regions, where biopolitics is not a story of heroes and successes but rather one of failures and dependency (Vessuri, 2007). The back and forth between high modernist optimism and the narrative of failure, in Latin American countries, has provoked distrust towards science and the State, suspect of responding to foreign interests (Barandiarán, 2018; Kreimer, 2011) and of

justifying authoritarianism in the name of modernity (Vessuri, 2007). Which were the icons of the industrial modernity of the time and how were they utilized for national projects? Which visions did this technologies, animals, humans, and representations portrayed and how did they intervene sociomaterial worlds? How are they today reconfigured through power structures in the form of memory, revival, or ruination?

In this panel, we explore the intersections between nationalism, colonialism, science, aesthetics, and social and natural engineering. How do imported landscapes get translated in other regions? How do these designs respond to production, aesthetic, colonial, historical, modern drives? How do they survive and changes? How can we trace nature transitions from agroindustry towards visions of apocalypse, collapse, and devastation? Which are the aesthetic values and tastes involved in those unifying visions? And what colonial practices do they convey, if we understood colonialism as the making of *Others* inferior to validate the *Self*?

We seek contributions that examine different regions, methods, and time periods while considering the updating of the Reaganist-Thatcherist-Pinochetist´s politics across the world. The US-Mexico Wall or the Microsoft Submarine Data Centre are symbols of contemporary politics: a form of liberalism which is 'nationalist, authoritarian, and racist' (Therborn 2018). How are past and present dreamscapes of modernity (Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, 2015) represented, aestheticized, and technologized and for which political projects? And how have they mediated, transformed, and reconfigured more-than-human worlds?

References:

Barandiarán J (2018) *Science and the environment in Chile. The politics of Expert advice in a neoliberal democracy*. MIT Press.

Foucault M (2003) *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the College de France 1975-76*. Bertani M and Fontana A (eds). Picador.

Foucault M (2009) *Security, Territory, Population*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Giucci G (2014) *Tierra del Fuego: La creación del Fin del Mundo*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Jasanoff S and Sang-Hyun Kim (2015) *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*. The University of Chicago Press.

Kreimer P (2011) *Ciencia y periferia. Nacimiento, muerte y resurrección de la biología molecular en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba.

Scott JC (1998) *Seeing like a state. How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.

Vessuri H (2007) *"O inventamos, o erramos". La ciencia como ideafuerza en América Latina*. Universidad Nacional de Quilmes.