

**From the New South to the Global South  
A Global History of Colonization**

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**In 1901 a small group of African-American agronomists from the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, undertook to teach the Ewe tribe in the German colony of Togo cotton-farming techniques deployed in the American South. Once put in a global historical context, Zimmerman shows how this short agricultural experiment charts the evolution of a globally interdependent capitalist world order that prefigures the North-South pattern of globalization we witness to the present day.**

Reviewed: Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

**From the American South to the Globalization of the New South**

Behind Zimmerman's eye-catching claim to look for "Alabama in Africa" stands an almost trivial colonial venture. In 1901, a small group of African-American agronomists from the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, undertook the short-lived and ill-fated experiment to teach the Ewe tribe in the German colony of Togo cotton-farming techniques deployed in the American South. By virtue of two experimental farms established in Tove and Notse, the "Tuskegee cotton expedition to Togo" indeed introduced a new cotton variety to the local economy that was suited to supply the European spinning industry. Yet, the project was seriously hampered by the many lives it claimed among its executors and the resistance it encountered among its target audience, the Togolese population. Lasting merely seven years, the expedition was limited in its local impact and far-reaching in its implications: the strange alliance between African-American emancipation and German imperialism, Zimmerman argues, helped to transform the "political economy of race and agricultural labor characteristic of the New South" into a "colonial political economy of the global South" (p. 1).

The New South had its sociopolitical roots in a peculiar form of American cotton cultivation. Because the quality of American cotton staples depended as much on the control of its varieties as on the disciplining of its growers, the social construction of the submissive, hardworking and ideally low-paid "Negro" became vital for its production after the end of slavery. To establish a system of sharecropping was part of the strategy that economic elites pursued in order to discipline free black labor in the post-emancipation South. Industrial education – with its aim to impart aptitude and enthusiasm for physical labor together with personal values such as cleanliness, sobriety and swift onto its (predominantly black) students – formed the other part of this strategy.

Booker T. Washington, himself a freed slave and a graduate of the Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute, one of the first American schools concerned with racial uplift, was

central in popularizing the “biological-social complex of American cotton growing” (p. 21). The industrial school he would set up in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1881 was molded after Hampton pedagogy, put a strong emphasis on conveying the “dignity of manual labor” (p. 48) and resonated with Washington’s famous dictum that African Americans should “cast down [their] bucket[s]” where they were (p. 51), instead of seeking new opportunities in Northern cities or Africa. To African Americans, Booker T. Washington’s industrial training offered a scheme of self-emancipation based on social upwards mobility through economic independence; but the scheme equally attracted whites as a means to limit blacks’ political aspirations, and to channel their economic force onto paths that maintained white domination. Although Booker T. Washington intended to improve the social and economic status of blacks in the South, his national and international reputation as a representative of the New South unfolded along this ambiguity. Encouraging blacks to pursue agricultural labor promised to stabilize social control and racial segregation, i.e. “conditions analogous to slavery.”<sup>1</sup>

As such, the “globalization of the New South” was only superficially related to German attempts to grow American cotton varieties in Togo. When Baron Beno von Herman auf Wain, an associate of the *Kolonialwirtschaftliches Komitee* (KWK) and the first agricultural attaché of the German embassy in Washington, D.C., persuaded Booker T. Washington to recruit a group of “negro cotton-planters” to instruct West Africans in 1895, German social scientists and policy-makers had long discovered the benefits of American small farming as a new regime of social control. Under the name “internal colonization,” the Prussian state had already operated a program of family farming designed to curb the social problems that emerged around the production of sugar beets and Polish labor migration in East Prussia in the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from disciplining free labor, the model had racial undercurrents. In promoting stable households and patriarchal family structures, the program of internal colonization was meant to exercise control over allegedly sexually promiscuous Polish labor migrants and to curb the “Polonization” of Eastern Prussia. (p. 89).

The Tuskegee expedition was born out of the several synergies German social science had revealed between the American system of sharecropping in the cotton sector and the German domestic experience with sugar beet cultivation. Since 1872, the newly founded *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Social Policy Association), formed around the economist Gustav Schmoller and Max Weber, had worked closely with American students, such as the famous African-American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois to explore the regulating potentials of the small farm regarding free labor, agriculture, and economically and sexually controlled households. Along with cotton seeds and agricultural techniques, the Tuskegee expedition thus brought the new exploitive economic structure of smallholding to West Africa. But it also catalyzed at least two broader trajectories along which the globalization of the New South continued to take shape after the expedition ended. On the one hand, the Tuskegee experiment made Togo an internationally recognized *Musterkolonie* (model colony) for a new progressive colonialism, endorsed by international liberalists and the League of Nations. And on the other, the transatlantic debates about the Tuskegee-model laid the intellectual groundwork for the formation of the scientific discipline of agricultural sociology in the Weberian tradition and its institutionalization in the influential and renowned Chicago school of sociology.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Cooper, “Conditions Analogous to Slavery: Imperialism and Free Labor Ideology in Africa,” in Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt and Rebecca Scott(eds.), *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies*, Chapel Hill (NC); London, 2000, UNC Press, pp. 107–50.

In bringing together the diverse aspects of regional transformations in the German East, the American South and the African West as well as the emergence of new bodies of international and transnational intellectual exchange, Zimmerman charts the evolution of a regionally differentiated and globally interdependent capitalist world order that prefigures the North-South pattern of globalization we witness to the present day (p. 13).

### **Multiple connections, many interventions**

The plethora of transnational and transcontinental links Zimmerman tracks in his relatively short, but nonetheless complex and extremely well-researched study (the notes section constitutes almost half of the book) make it at once an original and manifold scholarly intervention. The book is original because the “Tuskegee expedition to Togo” grounds the evolution of the global South in the relatively unexplored histories of the German empire and the African-American involvement with African cotton growing. Yet, its scholarly intervention is not limited to illuminating Afro-German relationships. Itself a non-national enterprise, the “Tuskegee episode” is instructive for understanding politics of race, labor and sexuality beyond both black nationalist and empire/state-centered perspectives. Instead, Zimmerman establishes the intertwined histories of Europe, Africa and America as a framework that is necessarily involved in and transcended by global economic interdependencies, international politics and the creation of universal scientific knowledge.

*Alabama in Africa* thus is rightfully labeled a study of “America in the World.”<sup>2</sup> In favor of a history of the “New Global South,” Zimmerman embeds the US into a truly transnational history of regional interactions and their structural similarities: like East Prussia and West Africa, the American South is treated as one of several locally specific versions of the same global entanglement. As such, the book contests even more than the well-known narrative of American exceptionalism. It also challenges its German counterpart, the *Sonderweg* as well as the long-standing absence of sub-Saharan Africa from both of these historiographies.

For this reason, the book perhaps even more rightfully calls itself a study of “globalization.” Following the growing trend among historians to “think global,”<sup>3</sup> Zimmerman fleshes out economic, political and intellectual macro-structures without being trapped in reconstructing of an “American world order” or in celebrating “globalization” as a mere increase of mobility and exchange.<sup>4</sup> In fact, as Zimmerman convincingly demonstrates, it was the proliferation of the rigid intersection of blackness, manual labor and cotton, bolstered through science and politics, that “allowed capital, commodities, workers, and ideas to move across a landscape of fixed differences and to remain stable across vast geographical distances” (p. 249).

### **Revisiting the Black Atlantic**

Finally, Zimmerman’s treatment of the Tuskegee episode reveals his ambition to reconstruct the ambivalences this small story entails, once put into a global historical context. Indeed, Tuskegee’s “colonial adventure story” (p. 1) serves a great deal to exemplify the complex interplay between emancipation and coercion, mobility and immobility, economic freedom and regulation that shaped the transnational world of imperialism around the turn of the century. While Zimmerman’s work is remarkable for putting the historically minuscule into dialogue with the powerful forces of “German social science, African cash cropping and the racial political economy of the New South” (p. 248), it tends to elide the voice of its

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<sup>2</sup>The book appeared in the Princeton Series of the same name.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Grillo, [“Thinking Global”](#), *Books and Ideas*, November 2012

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im deutschen Kaiserreich*. München: Beck, 2006), 13.

protagonist: Booker T. Washington. This might not come as a surprise, if one considers that Zimmerman's scholarly expertise lies in the history of imperial Germany and the history of science. Nor does it diminish the important and substantial contribution he makes to transnational and global historical literature. Rather, the silence of Booker T. Washington alludes to, as historian Gerald Horne put it, the "vanguard trend" in "internationalizing the African-American experience."<sup>5</sup> Zimmerman's work tells the story of how an emancipating Black Atlantic got hijacked by the attempts of international elites to establish a global racist division of labor (cf. p.65). It thus elucidates the fact that Black Atlanticism, the inherently transcultural and international formation of African diaspora populations that Paul Gilroy famously identified with a "counterculture of modernity," also articulated its relationships with imperialism and capitalism.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the Black Atlantic's core assumption, namely the mutual implication of slavery with modernity, remains intact – in this case with conditions analogous to slavery. With his new book, Zimmerman thus invites readers and researchers to revisit the old "anti-nationalist" Black Atlantic. More than an exemplary study of colonial globalization, *Alabama in Africa* holds out the proposition to understand Blacks neither as its objects, nor as its opponents, but also its agents.

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<sup>5</sup> See back cover.

<sup>6</sup>Paul. Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.