

Empires of Light, Empires of Darkness

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Looking at satellite images of the globe at night, large parts of the West as well as Asia are highlighted in a sparkling net of lights, while many areas of the Global South are still shrouded in darkness. These disparities between Global North and South have historical roots dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the time, technological innovations, urbanization, and industrialization in the “West” changed the fabric of urban agglomerations and later the countryside. This period of “high modernity” was also the heyday of European colonialism. And it was during colonial times that many “modern” urban infrastructures were being introduced in the Global South, including lighting. These colonial grids acquired considerable momentum, shaping later decisions on who should benefit from services and who would be excluded. Yet, while there is considerable literature on the history of lighting and its related energy infrastructures in Europe and North America, its colonial history has rarely been explored.

Empires of Light, Empires of Darkness investigates the makings and ramifications of an elemental urban infrastructure and household technology in the Global South. Focusing on the British Empire from the 1830s to 1960s (particularly India, the Sudan, and Ghana), the project is the first to explore the entwined colonial histories of artificial light and the night, utilizing lighting as a focal point for an investigation of global technological (ex)change and its impacts on society and the environment. It analyses key colonial cities such as Bombay, Calcutta, Khartoum, or Accra as contested sites of heterogeneous modernization, examining how the production and consumption of artificial light influenced night-time practices in different cultures and environments. Tracing the energy landscapes of colonial cities with their urban-rural connections, the project also scrutinizes persistence and change in the utilization of “everyday energies” as well as in the urban fabric of light and darkness. Building on recent research in urban colonial history that has challenged traditional views on the dualistic nature of colonial spaces, as well as on environ-tech discussions on everyday technologies and energies, the project argues that urban lighting was a contested commodity, both sought after and spurned, and that decisions for (or against) illumination projects were influenced by a variety of actors, motives, and factors—within and beyond colonial power politics.