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INTO THE STACKS ARTICLE RELAUNCH: "POWER AND CONNECTION"

Power, Connection, and the Endless Present

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> History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present …
>
> —George Orwell

Published more than a decade ago, Paul Kramer's "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World" is arguably the most important intervention in the field of U.S. and the World history. This roundtable affirms its standing among modern American historians. Yet the essay's exact influence is hard to characterize. Classic state-of-the-field essays—like Charles Maier's broadside against U.S. diplomatic history or Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's invocation of a long civil rights movement—spurred field-wide reckonings.[1] Kramer's impact was subtler. Recently, Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall cited the essay to say that the field should revisit U.S. policy making, using "Power and Connection" as a foil to discuss the limits of the international and transnational turns.[2] However, boosters of those turns—Erez Manela and Naoko Shibusawa, among others—ignore "Power and Connection," even as they advance claims about globalization and imperialism that touch on the article's arguments.[3] This impasse is as fascinating—as worthy of exposition—as Kramer's original claims, partly because it invites us to historicize the decade just past. Rather than handling the essay with antiquarian gloves, I'd like to dig into this dirt to consider three questions: What did "Power and Connection" displace? What did it do? And how does the essay resonate in our present?

Enlarging the context offers a departure point. Written as an elaboration of "Power and Connection," Kramer's "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire" amplified the former's argument.[4] Today, most scholars read the essays together. In twenty-one sharp-elbowed pages, Kramer attacked Daniel Immerwahr's Bernath lecture to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), arguing that Immerwahr had "condense[d], repackage[d], and celebrate[d] nearly all the major flawed assumptions that have compromised the historiography of U.S. overseas colonialism since its beginnings, even as it brands this perspective a bold, original, forward-looking conception of U.S. imperial historiography."[5] For SHAFRites, "How Not to Write the History of US. Empire"

[1]Charles Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kämmen (Ithaca, 1980), 355–87; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233–63.

[2]Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (2020): 38–55.

[3]Erez Manela, "International Society as a Historical Subject," *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 2 (2020): 184–209; Naoko Shibusawa, "U.S. Empire and Racial Capitalist Modernity," *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 5 (2021): 855–84.

[4]Paul Kramer, "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (2018): 911–31.

[5]Daniel Immerwahr, "The Greater United States: Territory and Empire in U.S. History," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016): 373–91; Kramer, "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire," 913.

refashioned "Power and Connection" as a rubric to measure the field's progress. And Immerwahr's response was revealing. Instead of pushing against Kramer's authority (or surrendering to his conclusions), Immerwahr unpacked how Kramer's writings informed several of his assumptions, suggesting the reason for "Power and Connection's" elusiveness: Kramer's words have meant different things to different people.[6]

If this is a problem, Kramer deserves some blame. Every semester, my students grumble loudly about the inaccessibility of his sentences. There is a lot of jargon in "Power and Connection." Sometimes, Kramer uses pronouns inconsistently. (In the quote above, for example, "it" refers to the historiography on U.S. overseas colonialism and Immerwahr's lecture.) Other times, the essay makes arguments with footnotes, which confuses people encountering the literature for the first time. Classic historiography essays tend to explain what they want to revise, but "Power and Connection" largely ignored the history of U.S. diplomatic history, despite that field's centrality to the essay's intervention. Without a rival interpretation to push against—or a story about how historians arrived together at a common juncture—the stakes are imprecise, which helps explain our lingering beguilement. "Power and Connection" stacks provocations into a magisterial tower; it does not guide the reader from one mindset to another.

These are legitimate complaints, but they should not obscure the essay's long, important shadow. In 2009, when Thomas Zeiler checked the health of U.S. diplomatic history for the *Journal of American History*, he celebrated everything he saw, ending his review with the declaration that the whole profession was jumping onto the SHAFR bandwagon.[7] Now, U.S. diplomatic history is gone. As Bessner and Logevall lament, the international and transnational turns devoured its questions and concerns, pushing diplomatic historians from history departments into policy schools or out of academia altogether.[8] When my students complain about "Power and Connection," I like to underscore the following: If any one individual upturned the status quo—if any single person authored the new field's categories and concerns—that person was probably Kramer, and "Power and Connection" arguably delivered the decisive blow against the status quo. Elusiveness aside, the essay helped end U.S. diplomatic history and create the habits of U.S. and the World history.

Thinking of the essay's impact this way pulls attention to a trio of questions, worthy of exposition and some (contestable) generalizations:

1. What was the context around "Power and Connection"? Looking back, 2009–2011 was an inflection point, and revisiting the context clarifies what set "Power and Connection" apart and why its assertions mattered so much.
2. What did Kramer do in "Power and Connection"? Basically, he said that U.S. diplomatic history should be more like the new imperial history, which tacitly invited colleagues working in that space to turn away from political science and international relations toward anthropology, critical theory, and literary studies.
3. What did this move change? A lot. Until relatively recently, U.S. diplomatic historians argued over how to emplot U.S. foreign relations, or how to characterize the motives and consequences of U.S. power. Increasingly, U.S. and the World historians debate

[6]Immerwahr, "Writing the History of Greater United States: A Reply to Paul Kramer," *Diplomatic History* 43, no. 2 (2019): 398; Andrew Seal, "Arrogance and Empire: What Can US Intellectual History Learn from US and the World?" *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, May 20, 2019, https://s-usih.org/2019/05/arrogance-and-empire-what-can-us-intellectual-history-learn-from-us-and-the-world/

[7]Thomas Zeiler, "The Diplomatic Bandwagon: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 4 (2009): 1053–73.

[8]Bessner and Logevall, "Recentering"; Daniel Bessner and Michael Brenes, "A Moral Stain on the Profession," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Apr. 16, 2019, https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-moral-stain-on-the-profession/; Daniel Bessner and Michael Brenes, eds., "The Academic Jobs Crisis: A Forum," *Passport* 42, no. 2 (2021): 30–53.

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ontology, or the way objects of study determine perceptions of reality/power. Even if "Power and Connection" did not cause this shift, the essay suggests how it happened.

Let us jump into question 1, because the inflection point of 2009–2011 was a long time coming. Formed in the late 1960s, SHAFR used to be a lightning rod in public debates about U.S. foreign relations. Some diplomatic historians mined the past for policy lessons; others critiqued that policy as tragic. But the conversation cohered because both sides took American exceptionalism for granted. Even those who pilloried U.S. capitalism saw salvation in U.S. democracy, and few SHAFRites felt that liberalism was indistinguishable from (let alone worse than) fascism or communism. When Arthur Schlesinger Jr. blasted William Appleman Williams in the pages of the *New York Times*, the exchange resonated because it channeled shared questions about how Americans (and humanity writ large) should live with modernity.[9] Living without modernity was conceptually impossible.

Things changed in the late twentieth century. During the 1980s, John Lewis Gaddis's post-revisionism embraced empire as a thinking tool, repurposing that once-mighty diatribe to compare and contrast imperial projects.[10] In the 1990s, Amy Kaplan asked harder questions about empires, using culture to show how they oppressed through differentiation.[11] By the 2000s, Odd Arne Westad was weaving together state and nonstate perspectives, using once closed archives to frame imperialism as modernization.[12] As editor of *Diplomatic History*, Michael Hogan wove these changes into a master narrative about SHAFR, and this was the story that Zeiler channeled in his bandwagon essay.[13] The field, Zeiler argued, should not ignore war and peace, especially with the U.S. military fighting wars overseas, but its previous shibboleths had to stay in the past. New methods and new sources had coalesced to uproot American exceptionalism—and everybody was now on the same team, marching in one direction.[14]

When Kramer published "Power and Connection," people were still debating this argument. For some, Zeiler exaggerated SHAFR's centrality to U.S. and the World history, a hiring category born from Thomas Bender's 2000 LaPietra report to the Organization of American Historians (OAH).[15] Matthew Connelly put one counterargument in sharp relief, positing non-national history as the logical next step of American post-exceptionalism.[16] And "Power and Connection" could be interpreted as Kramer's retort. The essay welcomed transnational history while imploring Americanists to keep power near the center of their thinking. Kramer's intervention rested on the premise that scholars of colonized places—Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, among others—had leapfrogged diplomatists by recasting imperialism as a

[9]Steven Cagney with reply by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Who Started the Cold War? An Exchange," *New York Review of Books*, Mar. 20, 1980, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/03/20/who-started-the-cold-war-an-exchange/; Frank Costigliola and Michael Hogan, eds., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK, 2014); Frank Costigliola and Michael Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK, 2016).

[10]John Lewis Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 3 (1983): 171–90; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York, 1997).

[11]Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC, 1993).

[12]Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK, 2005).

[13]Michael Hogan, "The 'Next Big Thing': The Future of Diplomatic History in the Global Age," *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 1 (2004): 1–21.

[14]Zeiler, "The Diplomatic Bandwagon," 1071–2.

[15]Thomas Bender, "The LaPietra Report: A Report to the Profession," *OAH website*, September 2000, https://www.oah.org/2000/09/01/the-lapietra-report-a-report-to-the-profession/; Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).

[16]C. A. Bayley, Sven Beckert, Mathew Connelly et al., "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1441–64; Matthew Connelly, Robert McMahon, Katherine Sibley et al., "SHAFR in the World," *Passport* 42, no. 2 (2011): 4–16.

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collection of contested and omnipresent relationships.[17] Examining how these relationships worked—putting aside the idea that empires were orderly or organized—exposed the way that power connected people over vast distances/scales in incoherent yet pervasive ways. And a history of connection promised to yield a different, better kind of American history. It put a spotlight on entanglements instead of labels.[18]

For this claim to resonate, readers had to accept the idea that entropy mattered more than semantics in conversations about power. Too often, Kramer argued, diplomatic historians handled concepts statically, priding themselves on the clarity that came from thorough definition. The new imperial historians fixed this error by tracing the way people jostled over the meaning of concepts in use. In this contest, elites enjoyed advantages—like influence over bureaucracies and access to resources—and these advantages created hierarchies and experts, but everything was contingent and intertwined. Powerful people never just imposed their views on others; their authority was relational and it operated in relentless motion. Because no claim possessed intrinsic stability, no truth existed outside the struggle for power, which is why empires so often changed their logic and form. In Kramer's words,

> A language of the "imperial" rather than "empire" can help avoid connotations of unity and coherence—thingness—that tend to adhere to the latter term, and move to the side the mostly unproductive question of whether the United States is or has "an empire"—and if so, what type it is, and whether or not it measures up to the rubrics built to account for other empires (1353).

Understanding entropy was like swallowing the red pill in the *Matrix* movie, and Kramer had rules for navigating this new landscape. Contact zones and travel ways revealed more than commands or doctrines, he argued, and these places/routes needed to be interrogated in ways that unsettled familiar assumptions about sovereignty, borders, and nationhood (1351–90). Astute readers grasped the implications. With admirable subtlety, the new imperial history pushed earlier modes of historical analysis to the side. There could be no policy lessons in the post-exceptionalist present. The scholar's job was to explain trajectories of thought/action to expose and critique imperial power. Tacitly, this move burned the bridge connecting diplomatic history to political science and widened a highway running toward anthropology, critical theory, and literary studies. And a decade later, the traffic is humming. If you attend the SHAFR or OAH annual meeting, Kramer's ideas are everywhere, and if you read *H-Diplo*, you have probably encountered colleagues wringing their hands over the chasm that now separates history from political science. The field has moved to the Left.[19]

We could debate whether "Power and Connection" caused this change. I think most people would say that Kramer captured a changed underway, and I think the better question is whether this change represents progress. Candidly, I have been a booster of new imperial history for the better part of this past decade, and my faith is wavering, partly because this shift has spurred a

[17]Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in the Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

[18]For context, Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York, 2006); Ian Tyrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective* (New York, 2007); Michael McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History,'" *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1056–67.

[19]Ryan Irwin, "Requiem for a Field: The Strange Journey of U.S. Diplomatic History," *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method* (New York, 2022), 1–30, https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/discover/bloomsbury-digital-resources/products/bloomsbury-history-theory-method/; Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Mark Wilson, "Sustaining Conversations between Historians and Political Scientists," H-Diplo/RJISSF Policy Roundtable II-3, June 28, 2023, https://issforum.org/policy-roundtable/h-diplorjissf-policy-roundtable-ii-3-sustaining-conversations-between-political-scientists-and-historians

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style of apocalyptic thinking that feels genuinely problematic. Red pill poppers have made labels like liberal, fascist, or communist meaningless, recasting modernity as an endless, open-ended contest over pretenses that only ever mask imperial relationships. There is not a lot of oxygen to talk about good government, let alone differentiate and judge the actions of powerful people. In this new environment, scholars with the same assumptions—about the value of postcolonial U.S. history, for example—tear each other down for reasons that feel pedantic to outsiders. Perhaps we should hold a mirror to ourselves: What kind of politics are we cultivating? Can historians possess a philosophy of power if deconstruction is our raison d'être? Is there a downside to only ever speaking truth to power? Have we fetishized radicalism without consequence?

"Power and Connection" is the most important intervention in the field of U.S. and the World history, not because it answers these questions but because it spotlights the conceptual leaps that anticipated them. Too often, critics say that today's field no longer cares about war and peace. It is more accurate to say that scholars now treat everything as war. Conflict is totalizing if entropy explains all aspects of power and connection, and common ground inevitably comes to feel like an oxymoronic fiction of an unjust status quo. This circles back to Orwell's quip about the endless present: why bother knowing history if progress is impossible—if consent and coercion only mask what Kramer so aptly calls the "language of the imperial"? Recently, after teaching "Power and Connection" in a seminar, a student put the point to me differently, asking whether I thought Kramer's way of thinking explained Donald Trump's appeal. If everything is war, the student said, why not embrace leaders who see that truth? Shouldn't we support the people who want to win?

The exchange is paraphrased and my response is irrelevant. The point is that I cannot stop thinking about the conversation's uncomfortable implications. We are right to pause reexamine "Power and Connection's" influence. We should also pause to consider its—and our—relationship to everything that has changed since 2011.

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