Real Mythic Histories: Circulatory Networks and State-Centrism

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I

In Mythologies, Barthes famously observes that a Paris Match cover photo of a West African military schoolboy in a French uniform saluting, presumably, the tricolor is a myth. It asserts as obviously true, “that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under the flag,” and in doing so it asserts as a reality the image of an empire characterized by consensually shared trans-racial pride. Myth, Barthes (1972: xx) writes, “transforms history into nature ... Myth ... purifies [things], it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.” The work of justification and naturalization that Barthes ascribes to the photo occurs on a foundation made of more basic myths: amongst these are the myth of an entity called France, and the myth of an empire.

Both France and empire, to be sure, were real in their consequences. But the claim that they are also myths emphasizes the perspective of state and empire as representations that naturalize and reify the outcome of historical processes and thus conceal the contingency and historicity of state-making and empire-building. Mythologization also conceals the fact that states and empires are ongoing processes, achievements held together by action rather than entities possessed of some analytically convenient, automatic ontological inertia. These features make mythology a primordial technique of state power, and particularly the sort of symbolic power so crucial to the creation of authority sufficient to compel, cajole, convince, or otherwise get people to go along with whatever program those who claim to exercise it have come up with or stumbled into (Loveman 2005). The naturalization of state or empire as a dominant framework through which actors understand and enact certain broad facets of their worlds is a powerful, low-maintenance technique for encoding authority into the structures of social life – the principles of vision and division as Bourdieu (1999) had it – that organize some relevant aspect of doing and being of those who have been made – at least in some respects – subjects (Foucault 1982).

The mythic character of the state also rears its head as one of the bugbears of Global Historical Sociology: state-centrism. As the Introduction to this volume argues, state-centrism has exerted a powerful influence over the social scientific imagination. This has been to the detriment of perspectives that focus on global, transnational, and local processes. Go (2014a) has argued that state-centrism is in part a product of how historical sociology developed. In connecting the question
of state-centrism to Barthes through the concept of mythology I hope to highlight a different aspect of this problem and a further range of questions and analytical possibilities that state-centrism can occlude. Whereas Go and Lawson argue in the Introduction that state-centrism is an analytic problem to be addressed, my complementary argument is that it is also an empirical phenomenon to be better understood. Susan Cotts Watkins (1990), for example, has shown that the increasing coherence of the nation state as a meaningful unit for the analysis of fertility patterns in Europe between 1870 and 1960 reflected in decreasing within-country and increasing between-country diversity in marital patterns and fertility rates. This, Watkins argues, was the result of a range of developments from education to goods distribution, which through complex cultural, institutional, and physical mechanisms intensified within-country similarities. That is to say, the fact that state-centrism is a useful analytical unit for analyzing fertility patterns is not just a more or less warranted social scientific assumption, but is also a result of state-making processes that the mythologization of the state makes it easy to forget. Watkins’ focus is on state-making processes that enabled state-centrism through greater communication and movement within a country. My focus in this paper is on another aspect of this problem: the production of state-centrism by state agents through the persecution, exclusion, and destruction of trans-state circuits.

It is hardly necessary to note that assuming the mythology of a group as the starting point rather than as the object of analysis is bound to leave some important questions unasked. In inveighing against state-centrism, GHS aims not to write states out of histories of global, transnational, and local circulation, but rather to write states into these analytical accounts in a way that does not occlude or upstage the dynamics of these alternative – sometimes radically alternative – processes. The goal is to chart their intersections and divergences, and to attend to the struggles between actors who wittingly or unwittingly represent fundamentally different circulatory networks and governing principles.

II

One of the questions ripe for investigation from the perspective of an alternative analytical framework to that of state-centrism is the emergence of imperial states in the early modern period (roughly the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries). Imperial states played a powerful role in shaping and reshaping patterns of global, local, and transnational circulation. Consider this example: Niall Ferguson (2008: 1–2) begins his book on the British Empire in the late eighteenth century because, he tells us, “this was when the British Empire became recognizably the greatest and most dynamic of European imperial structures, and when Britain, if not yet “the workshop of the world,” was well on the way to becoming the globe’s “greatest international trader and the chief carrier of the commerce of other nations.” Whatever the virtues of Ferguson’s subsequent analysis, it is firmly rooted, as the quotation suggests, in a theory of political sociology that takes states to be things – of greater or lesser size and power, with rising or falling fortunes – that do stuff. The alternative view this paper explores takes the superlatives Ferguson applies to the British Empire to be the result of processes through which an assemblage of circuits of goods, services, representations, and people came to be state-dominated. It then takes those processes as the central focus in the analysis of
imperial power in place of a focus on the entity to which they are often ascribed. The question posed, therefore, is how Ferguson’s mythologizing observations about the centrality of a national state to a complex network of social, political, and economic structures became an uncontroversial statement of fact. That Ferguson’s naturalization of the state as a category of analysis, and concomitant simplification of a complex processual equilibrium, seems entirely unremarkable is a puzzle indeed.¹

From the perspective of the sort of state-centric mythology to which Ferguson uncontroversially accedes, it seems obvious that states would play a dominant role in the expanding circulatory networks of the early modern period. From this perspective, states are treated as entities of sufficient coherence that empire could reasonably be understood as a kind of expansion of some aspects of an existing state into new territories. If one is willing to make a metaphorical stretch, we can think of this as a sort of amoeba-like view, where state expansion is a matter of an existing entity extending some part of itself into a new area. The most obvious problem with this view is that it obstructs more disruptive, multi-directional transformations where social orders need to be recreated in new places, amongst new people, in new contexts, and that the problems posed by those recreations and their linkages fundamentally changes existing structures of state power. The amoeba view, that is to say, is highly susceptible to the dubious notion of core-periphery relations as a one-way street.

A view more amenable to the theoretical and empirical concerns of GHS would instead take as key problems: 1) the centrality of state networks across a wide range of socioeconomic fields (and its corollary, the apparent coherence of states as identifiable structures during periods of expansion, contraction, and transformation of geographic, political, and social orders); and 2) the occlusion of other networks with alternative organizing principles such as pirates, smugglers, maroons, and rioters. For instance, to say that England colonized Jamaica – and ignoring all of the complexities introduced by the fact that it was Commonwealth troops ultimately under Cromwell’s command that seized control of the island and that seizure had to be confirmed on the restoration of Charles II – is to suggest a particular organizational and political arrangement between the two islands. That arrangement may be achieved in some near ideal-typical form, but it occurs, or at least did so in the Jamaican case, through a long, complex, often ambiguous process. Crucially, when the process ended, so too did the political organization of the relationship between England and Jamaica. The fact that we can accurately say that Jamaica was part of the British Empire and remained so for a long time was an ongoing achievement, not the expansion of an entity with an inherent identity into a new location. The apparent identity of an empire is as much a result of such ongoing achievements of connection and reproduction as it is their cause.

In other words, we need to analyze a “state effect” (Mitchell 1999). The “state effect” has three components: 1) the partial or complete domination of a multitude of socioeconomic networks by state agents, institutions, and semiotic grids; 2) the exclusion of global, transnational, and local circulatory networks; and 3) the occlusion of nonstate forms of organization and alternative social, political, and economic orders. A fresh start on the question of how states came to dominate many

¹ To be clear, Ferguson’s approach is both typical and defensible. The case I am making is not that the state is an inappropriate object of analysis, but rather that: a) state-centrism is a claim with baggage; and b) the development of alternative views is worthwhile.
aspects of the early modern world – and by extension to more clearly articulate as sites of empirical interest those aspects of early modern circulation that repelled or otherwise avoided state domination – must depart from somewhere other than the bounded coherence of the political mythology of state-centrism. Indeed, the appearance of bounded coherence and the apparent naturalism of state domination over the myriad networks that comprised early modern empire is precisely the issue that must be addressed.

Mitchell’s (1999) definition of the state as an effect rather than an entity represents a helpful departure from the usual analytic imagery of state-centrism involving entities with properties. In Mitchell’s view, rather than seeing the state as a thing that does things, we should see the state as a pattern of social consequences. This focus on state effects is helpfully explicit in putting front and center the relational, processual character of states (on relationalism as a guiding ontology for global historical sociology, see the Introduction to this volume). In doing so, it is a state theory amenable to the theoretical and empirical focus of GHS in that it raises state-centrism as an effect to be explained. The reification of states into objects of analysis that can be treated as real entities with persistent properties is one of the principal barriers to engaging state-centrism as a question rather than assuming it as a starting point. Mitchell is useful as an inoculant against this tendency.

But what effects, precisely, ought to be the focus of this reframed analysis? To avoid the static theoretical imagery of state-centrism, I will understand states and empires as pattern-effects in circulatory systems. By emphasizing circulation I mean to focus on effects relating to patterns of movement and transformation, departure and return, of goods, services, representations, and people. These patterns can range from stochastic churn to well-defined, repetitive circuits.

Circulation is a helpful starting point because it is inherently processual and agnostic with respect to other concepts introduced into the analysis. Trade flows, for instance, are equally circulatory whether they are in accordance with the limitation of a royal monopoly or if they are conducted by “interlopers” and smugglers, whether they follow their intended course as specified in their bills of lading or if they are intercepted by pirates or agents of other polities. The circulation of goods, people, services and ideas does not feed the empire – it is the empire.

One final preliminary feature to note is that, as defined here, focusing on circulation allows for the assimilation of mixed-media circuits, and avoids a forced choice between materialism and idealism. Ideas, words, orders, cultural frameworks, prejudices, textiles, gold, imprisoned human bodies,

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2 Marx is perhaps the best-known theorist of circulation. And central to a theory of state power as a circulatory structure is the Marxian notion of the production of power through the combination of enchained transformation sequences and the differential capacities that actors have to realize beneficial effects from the same resource. Marx, however, had the specific goal of contrasting circulation with money (capital) and commodities (consumption). He thus limits his concept of circulation in two ways. First, it must involve money: Marx writes in the Grundrisse that circulation does not refer to systems of exchange based on barter, feudal services, or other non-monetary relations. Second, for Marx, the basic action in a circulatory system is exchange. The meaning of circulation adopted here differs from Marx on both of these points: it is heterogeneous in its content; and it accommodates multiple mechanisms of circulatory movement. The things that circulate in the state-dominated circulatory assemblages that I take to be at the core of this model are varied. Goods, services, representations, and people cover most of the ground, but these categories mean that we are far from Marx’s insistence on money as the hallmark of circulation. Furthermore, as they circulate, these heterogeneous elements are continually subject to mechanisms of transformation and combination including direct exchange, to be sure, but also diffusion, contestation, appropriation, capture, multiplication, decay, and so on.

3 I will save the reader the graphical annoyance of putting all such designations in quotation marks for the rest of the chapter. However, terms like “interloper,” “smuggler,” “pirate,” “captain,” and “governor” are all artifacts of the state-dominated circulatory assemblages that I am analyzing, so perhaps the reader will indulge the argument by mentally supplying them.
credit, drunkenness, and calories can all be understood as elements of an empirical analysis of any given circulatory assemblage (for an example of this heterogeneity with respect to the emergence of binary sexual identities see Patil Chapter 6 of Global Historical Sociology). Things move from place to place; words are repeated, translated, or ignored, and transformed into actions, institutions, and goods; exchanges take place; and circulatory trajectories fork and divide to form multiplex networks, defined by the fact of motion. The key questions to ask in this framework are: a) what goes where; b) how circulatory elements are transformed and rerouted through exchanges; c) what patterns exist in a circulatory network or amongst distinct networks; d) why and how these circuits and patterns change over time; and e) what moves them in the directions of the patterns we see.

Generally speaking, the pattern-effect of central importance in the making of imperial states is the emergence and proliferation of state-dominated circulatory assemblages. In the case of the English/British imperial state, the key to this effect was the consistent effort by state agents to interrupt independent circuits of different sorts and to channel them through networks and institutions of state governance. They did so for a wide variety of circulatory networks, some crucial to the pursuit of a mercantilist model of maritime empire, others so peripheral and small-scale as to appear irrelevant to the analysis. The co-optation, exclusion, or destruction of independent local, transnational, and global circuits was one of the crucial challenges driving the formation of the infrastructures of the imperial state. These circulatory struggles are inscribed into the formation of imperial states, a kind of hidden historical foundation of the infrastructures of circulatory domination that made state-centrism a plausible myth. It is not enough to observe that state-centrism occludes histories of alternative circulatory networks; we ought to further note that the exclusion of such alternatives is constitutive of state-centrism.

III

From the middle of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century, the creation of the English/British empire involved a trajectory from circulatory assemblages characterized by multiplicity, informality, diffusion, and independence to state-dominated circuits. This transformation occurred across a range of circulatory networks, and with an astonishing consistency. The results of these processes were varied, with some resulting in enhanced control by state agents while, in others, state-domination and claims to governance were largely rhetorical. Many circuits remained beyond the grasp of state agents; others were ignored and carried on unimpeded. Attempts to create state-dominated circulatory assemblages took a variety of forms but also possess a consistency in their broad themes. They were simultaneously specific in detail and illustrative of an overarching vision of empire widely shared by English/British empire builders over the course of a century and more.

Pine trees are an apt place to begin. In his article on the White Pine Acts, Strother E. Roberts

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4 Empires and the imperial state are not the same. The latter is but one network within the former, though it seeks to dominate much of the rest in practice and all of the rest semiotically.

5 Distinguishing claims to governance that are rhetorical from those with practical consequences for the circuits in question is an empirical question.
(2010) describes an encounter that captures the character of the struggle over state-domination of circulatory networks. In a June 1753 letter, Benning Wentworth, Governor of New Hampshire and Surveyor General of His Majesty’s Woods complained to Roger Wolcott, Governor of Connecticut about the abuse that one of his agents had suffered in pursuit of his duties. The customs agent, Daniel Blake, reported an encounter with Daniel Whitmore of Middletown in which he was “seized by the said Whitmore, & thrown into a mill pond, whereby he was in great danger of being drowned.” Wentworth warned Wolcott that, “these are offences of a dangerous nature, & upon a due representation thereof by me to His Majesty may be injurious to your colony” (Connecticut Historical Society 1896: 310).

Blake’s dangerous dunking came as he was attempting to seize logs at Whitmore’s sawmill that were in violation of the White Pine Acts, a series of acts of Parliament laying claim to white pine trees in the American forests suitable for use as masts on Royal Navy ships. The violence visited upon the surveyor’s agent was not an isolated incident. In a 1765 Massachusetts case when “a certain gentleman in the county of Hampshire by virtue of a deputation from the Surveyor of his Majesty’s Woods seized all the white pine timber he could find on the river,” a group of men long-engaged in the lumber business “unhappily assembled in a riotous manner in the fields of Northampton.” They proceeded to seize the surveyor’s agent, and held him in Hadley until they had “by duress and battery ... obliged him to resign his commission” (Clifford, Williamson, and Bigelow 1869: 943). In another episode, a group of New Hampshire loggers from the town of Weare who had been caught illegally cutting white pine refused to pay an agreed upon fine. Benjamin Whiting, sheriff of Hollis, received a warrant for their arrest. His efforts to find one of the men named in the warrant were brutally interrupted when a group of local men attacked him and his deputy, beating them with sticks, cutting off the ear of one of their horses, and driving them from town. At this time of deep antipathy towards efforts of the British crown’s claims of the right to dominate the circulation of American taxes and goods, it is perhaps unsurprising that while the Superior Court of Judicature hearing the case in September 1772 found the ringleaders of the assault guilty, they were fined but twenty shillings plus court costs (William 1888: 187–189).

These violent subversions of the White Pine Acts reflect the deep resentment felt by those living in the colonies over what many of them saw as an illegitimate attempt by an imperial state to secure local resources. They are also a good illustration of the dynamics of social and political conflict over circulation. With the acts, British imperial state agents sought to replace a diverse collection of independent, local patterns of white pine circulation ranging from New Jersey to Maine with one dominated by the interests and administrative machinery of imperial state agents. White pine was a valuable local resource used throughout the colonies for road building, ship making, and a range of other purposes. The wood of the white pine was light and strong, and thus valuable. But for shipbuilders its most important features were that it grew both straight and tall. The forests of New England boasted numerous ancient giants of the species easily topping one hundred feet. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Baltic trade that had provided English masts throughout the seventeenth century was tailing off, and the Navy and its supporters turned covetous eyes to these giants of New England. In contrast to the diverse, local, independent patterns of white pine circulation that existed at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the ideal-typical circulatory system
that the White Pine Acts sought to impose channeled large trees to the shipyards of the Royal Navy. To do so, however, required an increasingly aggressive assertion of imperial ownership of white pine supported by an increasingly elaborate, expansive system of regulation covering the circulation not just of mast-worthy giants but of white pine in general. The circulatory network envisioned by these acts was a singular state-dominated circuit. The canalized circulatory pathway created by the acts included an agent of the Surveyor General of Her/His Majesty’s Woods marking a suitable white pine with a broad arrow, a set of ax marks that traditionally represented a royal claim in forestry. The tree would be cut down as needed, transported by river to a port, and shipped to a Royal Navy shipyard where it was transformed into a mast. Its circuit would then continue for an indefinite period of time as it moved its ship and the men on it through the circulatory networks comprising the role of the Navy in a maritime empire (Roberts 2010).

The details of how the White Pine Acts worked, and how the systems of surveillance, interdiction, punishment, and inducement through which state agents sought to enforce them developed, provide a helpful window onto state-centrism. It is a story of state-centrism as a goal – the Royal Navy’s demand for masts trumped the local, transnational, and global demands that could be communicated through independent trade networks. It is also a story of a solution to the practical problems posed by the persistent efforts of people to evade and subvert this goal – an increasingly intrusive state-dominated infrastructure created to control and direct the movement of white pine was the centerpiece of imperial white pine policy. The details of the genesis of the state apparatus that came to dominate the circulation of American white pine is instructive. The first of the White Pine Acts does not mention white pine at all, but was nonetheless crucial for establishing the circulatory claims advanced by future Acts. 3 & 4 Anne, c. 9 of 1704 aims to encourage the importation of naval supplies from “Her Majesties Plantations in America.” The concerns of the act are explicitly about existing networks of circulation and their damaging consequences. “Whereas the Royal Navy and the navigation of England wherein under God the wealth safety and strength of this Kingdom is so much concerned depends on the due supply of stores necessary for the same which being now brought in mostly from foreign parts in foreign shipping at exorbitant and arbitrary rates to the great prejudice and discouragement of the trade and navigation of this kingdom may be provided in a more certain and beneficial manner from her majesties own dominions” (3&4 Anne, c. 9). The imagery in this part of the act represents the kingdom as a bounded entity and it understands the significance of existing circuits of naval supplies with reference to this boundary, regretting the provision of needed supplies from outside, via outside shipping. According to the interpretation presented in the Act, this dependence on transnational circulatory structures was a costly, dangerous state of affairs, enabling exorbitant charges while also draining resources from the establishment of beneficial circulatory networks that could be established within the polity – “from her majesties own dominions.” Such internal forms of circulation were plausible because the “colonies and plantations by the vast tracts of land therein lying near the sea and upon navigable rivers may commodiously afford great quantities of all sorts of naval stores if due encouragement be given for carrying on so great and advantageous an undertaking.”

The benefits the Act expected from fostering a robust internal circuit of naval supplies from the forests of the American colonies to the shipyards of the Royal Navy included fostering English
maritime capacity by: providing more demand for seamen and shipping; increasing the overall rate of internal circulation, understood by contemporaries to be a key to the economic foundations of empire; creating a “vent of the woolen (and other) manufactures and commodities of this Kingdom and of other Her Majesties dominions in exchange for such Naval Stores”; preventing the flow of money and bullion to foreign countries; and providing a return to “Her Majesties Subjects in the said Colonies” to make “due and sufficient returns in the course of their trade.” This list of potential benefits is important for understanding the genesis of the White Pine Acts and the systems of control they instantiated over the following seven decades. But they also reflect a more general pattern of the attribution of strong salience to the relationship between the boundaries of the nation and circulatory networks, with a preference for national over transnational or global circuits. As Thomas Leng (2005: 935) has noted, the early modern English “discourse of trade” took as its foundation the notion that the rewards of trade “did not fall equally, and in fact seemed to increase inequalities between trading partners. This made it necessary for the state proactively to defend the nation’s commercial interests, imposing order on the legislative vacuum in which foreign trade occurred, on behalf of the public good.” At the heart of that order were two linked, binary constructions: the English nation and the foreigner; state-dominated order and chaotic independence. Leng (2005) helpfully clarifies the relationship between these binaries, with the chaos of independence representing a risk of immiseration at the hands of other nations precisely because it occurred outside of the protective embrace of state-dominated commercial order.

Another way to put this is to see the White Pine Acts as reflecting the preference of contemporary state agents for state-dominated circulatory networks. It is not hard to envisage a system that encouraged the circulation of naval supplies within the forcefully imagined boundaries of empire through market measures. Indeed, this is one aspect of the White Pine Acts. From 3&4 Anne, c.9 through 2 George II, c. 35, state intervention into the circulation of naval supplies from America and Scotland involved a system of bounties – sums paid to incentivize these imports. Though complicating matters by requiring its own regulatory circuits (including Naval commissioners responsible for payment, but only upon receipt of a certificate from an officer of the English customs at the port of discharge, which would only be issued by that person’s receipt of a certificate from a colonial customs officer or other official to whom the merchant shipping the cargo had sworn an oath that the naval stores in question were bona fide colonial products, this certificate further supported by a repetition of the same oath upon arrival), this system was essentially a way to raise the compensation for the same naval supplies.

However, the Acts went much further than bounties. Other provisions of the Acts attempted to forcefully assert a specific circuit of goods, money, people, and ideas, regulated by an increasing number of nodes of state intervention. The goal of this circulatory intervention was a system for monitoring and enforcing state-centrism as an effect in the complex circulatory system driven by some tall New England trees. 3&4 Anne, c.9 focused on controlling pitch pines and “tar trees,” and it did so by forbidding people from cutting them as well as imposing a £5 fine for each offense. This fine depended on a subsidiary regulatory circuit involving an oath sworn by one or more witnesses before a Justice of the Peace, with a portion of the proceeds being paid to the crown and another portion to the informer. The Act further forbade setting fire to forests, which was to become one of
the techniques for resisting the circulatory ambitions of imperial state agents. Six years later, in 1710, 9 Anne, c.22 also takes the circulation of white pines as its focus. This Act begins noting that “whereas there are great numbers of white or other sort of pine trees fit for masts growing in Her Majesties Colonies,” subjects were forbidden from felling or destroying any trees greater than twenty-four inches in diameter at twelve inches off the ground, lest they face a £100 fine assessed through the same circuit of informers, justices of the peace, and shares of the proceeds created by the earlier act. The 1710 act called upon the Surveyor General of Her Majesties Woods in the areas where white pine grew to mark all white pines of sufficient size to fall under the act with the broad arrow, a forestry symbol signifying a crown claim, as well as to create registers of such trees to help enforce the Act.

The next major intervention into the circulation of white pine came in 1721 with 8 George I, c.12. After addressing anew the customs issues raised by the import premium system for a range of naval stores, this Act turns to white pine. It finds the system created by earlier efforts insufficient and seeks to intensify the state-dominion of white pine circulatory networks. The Act forbade the cutting or destruction of any white pine trees “not growing within any township or the bounds, lines or limits thereof, in any of the said colonies or plantations.” The Act goes on to establish a schedule of fines that increased as the size of the trees increased. In 1729, the white pine issue was addressed again in 2 George II, c. 35. It explains that “since the passing of [8 George I, c. 12] great tracts of land, where trees fit for masting grow, have been, in order to evade the provisions of the said act, erected into townships.” The 1729 Act responded to this manipulation of the terms of the earlier infrastructure in favor of independent local circuits by forbidding the cutting of all white pines except those that were privately owned. In practical terms this extended the reach of the imperial state’s claim over white pines to all “except such as are the property of private persons only, and nothing is lookt upon as private property, but lands under actual improvement & inclosure” (Connecticut Historical Society 1896: 309).

In this way, the White Pine Acts went from being a general royal claim over colonial resources to a highly specific administrative apparatus stretching from London to colonial centers and from there out into the woods, wrapping certain trees in invisible but highly consequential claims. The use of the broad mark on trees of interest envisioned in the early Acts is both illustrative as an administrative technique in its own right and useful as a metaphor for the later extension of the royal “mark” over all white pine trees. Even many of those previously understood to be property were now something else: a point of struggle over circulation. The White Pine Acts are a helpful illustration of the character of the construction of state-dominated circulation through the imposition of new regulatory nodes that sought to interrupt and exclude independent local and transnational networks in favor of state-dominated channels. They are also helpful in the way that they show the progressive deepening of the legal claims and administrative reach of this system.

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6 In 1712 the first of the White Pine acts was renewed prior to its expiration (12 Anne, chapter 9), but a similar premium system was added to encourage the importation of naval stores from Scotland, a part of the British policy following the Acts of Union in 1707. This reenactment also includes a provision intended to deal with the problem of the fraudulent importation of “foreign naval stores” by merchants who would then claim the premium for “north British naval stores,” a provision that is striking in its apparent focus on shoring up the foreign/national binary in the circulation of naval stores, and thus encouraging internal circulation without any reference to issues of cost or quality.
demonstrating the development of a web of state-domination laid over territories and resources understood through different relations of property, control, and circulation.

IV

The White Pine Acts are also a helpful window onto two distinct connections between state-dominated circulatory assemblages and state-centrism. First, the White Pine Acts were explicitly state-centric in their prioritization of the interests of imperial state agents in acquiring white pine for naval masts over other uses, using a series of regulatory interventions as a means of securing a resource for war-making. Second, they made “the state” an important analytical category for understanding the histories and networks knotted together by the movement of white pine trees. The boundaries of the English/British polity as defined by the state became the de facto boundary of the circulation of most white pine from America. It is a reasonable assumption to take this boundary as a given, but it is important not to lose sight of the intense effort involved in creating and maintaining this circulatory reality. The contestation of the state-dominated white pine circulatory networks captured in the riotous violence of the men of Weare or the dunking of Deputy Blake in the mill pond were an ongoing challenge, as was the pull of transnational and global circulatory networks that could also have moved the pines. That is to say, the state became an important analytical category for understanding the circulation of white pine. But its importance emerged through its role in defining a zone of struggle rather than because of some natural or necessary centrality. The achievement of a state-dominated circuit of white pine is not a story of struggle successfully concluded and then routinized, but one of constant struggle on two fronts: first, against circuits of local use; and second against global and transnational circuits. Any degree of circulatory control over the movement of white pine achieved by English state agents depended on an apparatus of constant exclusion, a continuing effort to secure the boundaries of the circuit from the ongoing pressure of alternative patterns of circulation.

Similar dynamics can be found throughout the apparatus of the English colonial state, from the Navigation Acts to the establishment of the colonial customs service and the struggles over charter and proprietary colonies. Indeed, according to my argument, it is no accident that the new charter for Massachusetts issued in 1691, a document written after the Glorious Revolution and the popular overthrow of the Dominion of New England and that marked a hiatus in the focus on resumption of direct crown rule over colonies as the key to colonial administration,7 concludes on this rather specific circulatory point:

“Wee doe hereby reserve to Vs Our Heires and Successors all Trees of the Diameter of Twenty Four Inches and upwards of Twelve Inches from the ground growing upon any soyle or Tract of Land within Our said Province or Territory not heretofore granted to any private persons And Wee doe restrain and forbid all persons whatsoever from felling cutting or destroying any such Trees without the Royall Lycence of Us Our Heires and Successors.”

7 The resumption question was by no means dead, however, becoming a focus of the new Board of Trade by the turn of the eighteenth century (Steele 1966).
The problem of colonial administration is the creation of authority from a constant, restless movement of people, things, and ideas. State-centrism was a project. In the English/British case, this project took the form of a pursuit of a meta-network that linked, ordered, channeled, and directed all circulatory networks through the state.

However, there was no hope that reality would ever equate to this state-centric network imagery. Indeed, the history of state-centrism as a project of the English imperial state, reflecting a general feature of state-centrism, must equally be a history of smugglers, pirates, interlopers, foreigners, fraudsters, customs officials, royal symbols on pine trees, and revoked charters. Jail breaks, slave revolts, riots, hostile juries, recalcitrant colonial governments, forged bills of lading, borderland trades for forbidden goods far from the eyes of authorities, and tax resistance should not, in the tradition of the sociology of deviance, be seen as simple violations of the administrative ambitions of the colonial state. Rather, these groups and events represent sites of struggle over the structure of circulatory networks. Understood this way, they are not violations of state-centrism. Rather, they are the sites through which state-centrism was forged through the exclusion and denigration of its others.

Nor should such groups and events be understood merely as part of a formative proto-period for a state-centric circulatory empire. They are instead markers of the ongoing struggle required to buttress the circulatory domination of the state-centric imaginary. A relational view of state-centrism as an empirical project emerges precisely because it was a mobile, ongoing achievement. Perpetrators and purveyors of independent circulation were always waiting (if they were not already active in the zones of their would-be exclusion), ready to dismantle state-dominated circuits and to dissolve whatever appearance of solidity and inevitability they had attained. Independent circulatory networks were and remained the solvent of myths built on the centrality of the state to its myriad networks. The history of state-centrism, that is to say, cannot be reduced to state agents and their centrist strategies and imageries; it must also be understood through the centripetal forces of alternative, independent forms of circulation connected to the local, transnational, and global networks that state-centrism, at least on the model of the English/British empire, sought to interrupt, exclude, and redirect.

For example, it is impossible to engage with the history of the Navigation Acts without engaging the matter of smuggling – the Acts’ persistent, pervasive obverse. Even as state agents assembled the administrative infrastructures supporting the vision of imperial circulation legislated by the Navigation Acts, alternative circuits abounded. While smuggling by its nature leaves few records, the records of those who sought to enforce the Navigation Acts speak eloquently to the pervasive character and persistence of smuggling. From his time as customs collector for New England, for instance, Randolph’s papers include a list of actions that he took against ships he suspected of violating the Navigation Acts between March and December 1680. The list of ten actions includes accounts of ships suspected of importing goods directly from Ireland without first being offloaded in England, vessels directly loading tobacco onto a Scottish ship, a ship loading tobacco for Bilbao without posting bond or being cleared for entry, and a vessel importing unspecified European goods without a certificate and without having offloaded the cargo in England.
In another example of the connection between smuggling and transnational circulatory networks, Captain George St. Loe reported in May 1687 of the illicit circulation of goods from the Leeward Islands through transnational networks facilitated by Dutch ships from St. Eustatius. He noted an elaborate ruse where Dutch ships would:

generally touch at all our islands on pretext of watering. They generally stay a week, when all the planters go aboard and not only agree for what is on board, but watch their opportunity to get it ashore, to the loss of the revenue and of the merchants, who, having paid duty, cannot sell so cheaply. Having disposed of their cargoes the ships go to Statia [St. Eustatius], where they wait for the planters to send their sugar, which they very punctually do, though the English merchants, their creditors for some thousands, cannot get a pound of sugar from them. Most of the islands have so many bays and inlets that it is impossible for the Custom-house officers to check the shipping off of the sugar, and the Dutch ships generally send their long boats to St. Christopher’s once or twice a week, on pretence of getting water, though one boat load of water would last them a month, but in reality to load sugar. Being loaded, the Dutch ships sail direct to Holland without paying the King a penny of duty. Brandy and wine are also smuggled into the islands from French St. Christopher’s. It is impossible for the Custom-house officers to check this traffic unless they have two or three small vessels, good sailers, to cruise up and down and examine all sloops and boats passing to and fro. (Fortescue ed. 1899, no. 1281)⁸

The situation a generation later is strikingly similar in the persistence of smuggling, as with the schooner Roast Beef, tried in a Maryland vice-admiralty court for unloading rum and sugar and loading flour, tar, and horses for a foreign port on part of the Chesapeake without a customs house, for which violation of the Navigation Act the Roast Beef was condemned (Owen and Tolley 1995: 325). In another Maryland case involving intracolonial smuggling to avoid duties imposed by the Navigation Acts, a vice-admiralty court heard the case of the sloop Hannah allegedly involved in trading in iron between colonies without the required bond and using a forged register (Owen and Tolley 1995: 333).

The overall picture given by trial records and other reports is of a multitude of independent, local circulatory networks, linking local networks across colonial lines without passing through the channels prescribed by the state-centric Navigation Act system. These networks ultimately extended further through connections with the Dutch, French, and New Englanders who moved the produce of many local networks across the imagined borders of the enclosed trading system. These networks represented a constant challenge to the vast intervention into Atlantic circulatory systems perpetrated by the Navigation Acts over the course of a century. It is worth noting that there does not seem to have been a trajectory of declining smuggling even as the Navigation Acts improved the administrative capacity of the imperial state and expanded the scope of the interventionism envisioned by the Acts. The later acts were violated with abandon, suggesting that rather than understanding smuggling as an aberration from a system organized along the lines proposed by the Navigation Acts, we should see colonial circulation as a hybridization of state-

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⁸ For more on the role of the Dutch in facilitating the unlawful connection of English colonial commerce to transnational and global circulatory systems see Koot (2011).
centric and autonomous circulatory networks, at once conforming to the national imaginary of the Navigation Acts while systematically violating it in favor of alternative networks of circulation. These overlapping systems were constituted in part by their opposition.

The slave trade is another area where state-centrism is best understood as one force in a mix of countervailing alternatives. The trade in enslaved Africans was crucial in the consolidation of the sugar economy, one of the main circulatory flows forming the economic backbone of the early modern English empire from the latter half of the seventeenth century. English state intervention into this circuit was the paradigmatic form of state-centrism. The crown granted an English monopoly over the West African trade to the Royal African Company, noting the importance of developing the slave trade in the Company’s charter. The monopoly was to be enforced in part with the help of customs agents in England who would block non-company ships laden with cargoes of goods known to be the basis of the West African trade. The company itself adopted a number of policies meant to further entrench its monopoly, including bonding requirements for its captains, and the use of inspectors in the West Indies responsible for ensuring that enslaved Africans arrived only in company ships.

This sharply state-centric circulatory vision cannot, however, be taken as any sort of essential form from which deviations and violations occurred. Rather, the circulation of people, goods, services, and ideas involving England, West Africa, the West Indies, and the east coast of America was defined by a complex interaction of actors, motives, strategies, and patterns of circulation. The Royal African Company was never able to enforce its monopoly effectively, and reports from company agents are filled with accounts of interlopers. These interlopers represented a challenge to the state-centric vision of monopoly, connecting various English port towns with alternative West African, West Indian, and American circulatory networks that evaded the customs house and the distributional policies through which the Royal African Company was made a tool of imperial state formation (Norton 2015). Interlopers did not represent the only alternative vision to state-centric efforts to direct and control the slave trade and the institution of slavery in the colonies. In a remarkable analysis of resistance to the main paths of circulation comprising the slave trade, Taylor (2009: 3) documents four hundred cases of shipboard slave revolts during the eighteenth century. Far from the well-defined vessels of imperial circulation moving captives to territories in need of exploitable labor, voyages through the middle passage involved a powerful confrontation of forces barely in balance. Usually that balance was maintained in favor of the slavers, who utilized a wide range of techniques from guns and shackles to starvation and torture in order to maintain control of the circulation of their captives. The forces arrayed on the other side of this violent shipboard equation, however, shared suffering, the desire for freedom, and desperation. They also had the potential to generate moments of violent resistance. Far from an occasional deviation from the orderly confines of a well-established, state-dominated circuit, Taylor (2009: 4) argues that shipboard insurrections were pervasive: “shipboard revolts were not at all uncommon but in fact plagued slave traders every step of the way throughout the long history of the trade.”

Slavery itself was similarly defined by the ongoing confrontation of powerful forces, some in favor of state-centric institutional order, others in favor of the independent, alternative circulatory orders
that plantation owners sought to establish. These circuits were fueled by interlopers bearing captives and smugglers able to trans-ship their goods outside the regulated commercial networks of the Navigation Acts into potentially more lucrative and certainly more open transnational and global trading networks. Also crucial in shaping slavery as a site of circulatory contestation were the enslaved themselves, whose history constitutes a constant chronicle of resistance and revolt, from the slave forts of West Africa to the cane fields of the West Indies. Patterson (1970: 289) begins his classic analysis of Jamaican maroon society, for example, by arguing that “few slave societies present a more impressive record of slave revolts than Jamaica. During the more than 180 years of its existence as a slave society, hardly a decade went by without a serious, large-scale revolt threatening the entire system. Between these larger efforts were numerous minor skirmishes, endless plots, individual acts of violence against the master, and other forms of resistance.”

He goes on to describe in detail how slavery, a crucial node of state-centric imperial circulation, was a process of constant, brutal conflict, making colonial Jamaica “a brittle, fragile travesty of a society which lingered during these years constantly on the brink of upheaval and anarchy” (Patterson 1970: 293). Fragility is a useful concept, for it demands that we not take the mythology of form – a plantation economy based on slave labor – promoted by the state-centric ambitions of English state agents, for granted. State-centric political order in Jamaica was under constant assault, as testified by the history of slave revolts and the First Maroon War.

By the same token, the fragility Patterson notes points to the possibility that the achievement of state-centrism is best understood not through myths that simplify its forms and grant it the appearance of finite substance, but as the achievement of temporary equilibriums amongst the multitude of interacting forces that state agents in any given context seek to order, enclose, and control. Any analysis of such equilibriums must account both for those forces that become (temporarily) dominant and also for the alternative forces that play a role in defining the character of the struggle, and thus the character of the equilibrium achieved. State-dominated circulation is not the stable, organized achievement suggested by myths of the state. Alternatives always found their way in. In this sense, state-centrism is defined by a position between fragility and mythology.

VI

There is an enduring dilemma in the historiography of the first English empire and the circulatory system established by the Navigation Acts. Many have seen a high degree of consistency in this system, reflecting a relatively cohesive mercantilist policy. This perspective, however, has come in for revision by those who argue that the supposedly mercantilist system was insufficiently systematic to be understood as a system at all. Numerous, distinct policy questions beneath the surface of the tag mercantilism do not bear the straightjacket of a postulated ideological coherence very well.

The skeptics of mercantilism have a point. The claim that a consistent policy dominated the political economy of empire over a 130-year period requires a high tolerance for abstraction. And yet the argument of this paper is that state-dominated circulatory assemblages were a consistent policy
goal throughout the period, as were many of the techniques employed by state agents – interruption, exclusion, co-optation, the insertion of nodes of governance, channeling circuits, and enclosure. The difference between these views is the difference between policy, specific programs of governance, and sensibility, orienting worldviews, beliefs, and preferences. The argument of this paper is not one for the consistency of policy over a long period of time. Rather, it is an argument about a consistent sensibility in political imagination, which produced mercantilist state-centrism across a multitude of fields of imperial circulation; it is about a way of looking at the world that highlights the prevalence of state-centric circulatory forms. It was this sensibility, shared for more than a century by English state agents, rather than any specific policy manifestations it generated, that provided consistency over this long period of empire-building.

This political sensibility associated order, safety, and good government with clearly bounded state-dominated circulatory networks. The state created and maintained those boundaries as one of the main ways to protect the polity and advance its interests. According to this political worldview, circuits that were independent of the state represented threats, funneling resources out of the polity and/or bringing dangerous things into the polity. Mercantilism was not, therefore, a consistent vision about the role of the state in issues of political economy. Rather, it was a worldview organized around an image of a community at risk whose happiness – and even survival – depended on: the boundaries delineating inside from outside; the circuits within and across that boundary that had the potential to generate new growth, dynamism, and opportunity; and the funneling away of resources as other nations and other networks achieved circulatory advantages (on the development of British economic thought in the context of the circulatory networks of imperial trade see Erikson, Chapter 8 in *Global Historical Sociology*). The proper position for the state was athwart such risky circuits, marking off the boundary, and ensuring that what crossed it was amenable to a thriving polity.

This political sensibility is the foundation for understanding the longevity of the antagonism exhibited by those state agents responsible for bringing the English/British state/empire into being and defining its borders against alternative forms of global, local, and transnational circulation. It is the foundation, that is to say, for historicizing state-centrism as a goal pursued by state agents that persisted across a wide range of circulatory networks over a long period of time. The key to thinking about state-centrism as an effect is less about efficiency of implementation in any given case – for instance, it seems clear that for all the words spoken and money spilled, pervasive smuggling was always constitutive of colonial circuits – than it is about a political sensibility. The central feature of this sensibility was the interruption of existing circulatory systems through the insertion of new nodes of state power that reoriented those circuits in the direction of state-linked circulatory networks such as taxation or monopoly, state categories of meaning and representation, and state legal requirements and limitations. This sensibility was shared by political elites and their institutions, placing them into persistent conflict with the circulatory networks, and colonial and state populations many of whom saw state-dominated circulatory assemblages as a problem for profit, movement, and desire, as a barrier broken through, not a rampart to be defended. Though always only partially successful in the face of the scale and scope of the flows they resisted and the indifference verging on hostility of the populations political elites sought to govern, their partial successes in implementing this state-centric political sensibility eventually created a powerful
centripetal pull towards state-centric network structures and state-centric understandings of circulation. At the same time, state-centrism was a claims-making endeavor, the central trope of which, obviously enough, was the centrality of the state. Alternatives were not alternatives, but deviations, instances of illegality, threats to be put down. State-centrism involved not just a gradual pull to the center, but the aggressive interdiction, marginalization, and destruction of circuits out of place (Douglas 2005).

In the case of the early modern English empire, state-centrism should not be dismissed as ‘mere rhetoric.’ Its core was the quite real transmutation, incremental in any given case, but pervasive over time, of myriad networks of interaction and circulation into parts of the state. One image we could adopt to represent this process is the drawing of multiple networks into a boundary that divided and linked aspects of space with commerce, law, symbols, movement, and time – the heterogeneous boundaries of an imperial state. Another image is of state formation as an outward movement, a process of extension through the cumulative, exclusionary association of independent forms of circulation with networks of state power. The result of this process is a state that through its promiscuous symbolic and practical infiltration of circuits of all kinds becomes the common thread, the most obvious way to link otherwise diverse circuits, the macro-structure that makes the most sense because it touches so many other structures. Using both images simultaneously – boundary making and state extension – enables us to analyze the creation of the myth of the state as a durable entity.

The English empire emerged from transnational circulatory networks, with its early foundations built on pillaging the Spanish and breaking into the efforts of other imperial states to construct their own state-dominated circuits. By the second half of the seventeenth century, this transnationalism was displaced by the long period of consolidation on which this chapter has focused, taking the form of a prolonged struggle to erect an empire comprised of state-dominated networks that excluded independent local, transnational, and global patterns of circulation. It is telling that, at the end of the period considered here, the British empire suffered a tremendous, jolting dislocation of its circulatory networks following the American War of Independence. By the 1780s, the patterns of internal circulation so assiduously crafted over more than a hundred years had been fundamentally reconfigured with new national boundaries cutting across the old circulatory networks (on the intersocial character of revolution see Lawson in Global Historical Sociology). The political sensibility of state-dominated circulation was at the center of this rupture (Breen 2005). What are disputes over rights and taxation but disputes over circulation? It seems appropriate to the argument of this chapter relating to the forces of dissolution and the alternatives to state-domination waiting always in the wings that this phase of empire ended as it began 150 years earlier, with state-centrism simultaneously shattered and resurgent, an uneasy fusion of history and mythology.
Bibliography


