

FLORIAN SPRENGER

## **ACCOUNTING, REGISTERING AND DISTRIBUTING – COMMENTARY TO RAFICO RUIZ**

The colonization of geographical spaces, of wide distances and uninhabited lands was, and still is, bound to media, technology and infrastructures. They are used to account, register and distribute and can be regarded as basic elements of colonial empires. On the one hand, they determine the extensions of space and account for the number and attributes of objects in it. Lists and maps, archives and databases are created by registrars and cartographers, land surveyors and drones in order to collect data, store temporalities and overcome bureaucratic obstacles. In this regard, colonization is also a question of registering and accounting, because knowledge about what colonies consist of is a precondition of ruling them.

On the other hand, based on the collected knowledge, media of mobility make it possible to distribute objects and people in space – from postal services to telecommunications, from horses to icebreakers. Objects, people and data have to be moved to the colony, from the colony and in the colony. Colonies are places of exchange. Things, humans, or data come and go, but to come and go they must be stored. Sites of storage from docks to databases operate between different orders and modes of transport. Each dock has its own transportation system to deliver whatever arrives according to its models of distribution. Each database has its own rules of correspondence. They are places at which objects are classified and categorized. They are, in other words, the unexchangeable basis of exchange. Modes of production may differ, travel may develop new forms, and data transmission may have new media, but they all rely on networks with nodes at which processes of docking take place. Confronted with technologies of tracking and tracing, we are witnessing a revolution in global or local distributions and circulations due to locative media, new trade routes, and adaptive

infrastructures.

In this regard, the colonization of the arctic is still part of the dispositif established by the Spanish Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to colonize South America: everything and everyone coming from or moving to the contested continent had to be registered, as Bernhard Siegert has shown in his study on *Passagiere und Papiere*, in the so-called *Casa de la Contratación de las Indias*, originally based in Sevilla, which connected bureaucracy and navigation in order to rule the New World.<sup>1</sup> At this place, the names and histories of everyone and the quantities and uses of everything to be sent over the Atlantic, were written down and archived. If registering and accounting could have been complete – they never were – the King would know such details about every object on the new continent. Similar to the *Domesday Book* from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, this database served multiple purposes, but in the end became an end for itself. Perhaps the *Arctic Spatial Data Infrastructure* (SDI) – both a database and archive, an infrastructure for distribution and collection of data – is a new version of this large-scale machine for accounting, registering and distributing. Accounting is a technology of power that employs infrastructures of traffic to control the distribution of objects and humans in space. Thus, it accounts for connections and disconnections, and is the basis of resources and goods for circulation. With this historical background it is no surprise that the SDI's tendency is from “collection to action” – action is part of the collection from the beginning.

In any case, colonization is a question of representation, not only in the sense of political agency. Representation in this context also means to establish a virtual image of the space to be colonized, an index and archive of its potential uses and abuses, an account of actions and reactions, of things and humans. These representations depend on changing media and infrastructures of representation. This historical process of representation also draws close to the imaginary, because colonization from the distance usually interacts only with such representations – the Spanish king ruled the data he obtained rather than the regions it covered. The companies exploiting the arctic today use their digital maps and data to explore the area, maybe without ever setting a foot on the Arctic. The messy details of earth, water, air and fire are only registered by those who come up close. This division of work is still in place today, even more so with automated drones, satellite surveillance and computer simulations. The adventures of explorations, deeply embedded in “Western imperial imagination”, are the stories that are told, but they are told only on the basis of collected accounts and

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1 Cp. Bernhard Siegert, *Passagiere und Papiere. Schreibakte auf der Schwelle zwischen Spanien und Amerika*, München, Fink, 2006.

registrations. Thus, the imaginary that goes hand in hand with the real and symbolic orders is still important to understand the geopolitical role of the Arctic. Rafico Ruiz deals with colonizing representation and with representing colonization. The visual instruments are part of the processes of extraction and the imaginary of colonization is based upon those infrastructures.

As Ruiz' text shows, the Arctic is probably the last region on earth – despite the deep sea – that can be accounted for as unknown – so unknown at least that it can be colonized, which in this context means that it can be subdivided and exploited. Today, it is still as difficult and dangerous to visit the Arctic, as it was to cross the Atlantic 400 years ago. Consequently, Ruiz' investigation of the media and infrastructures of the Arctic can be read as an update on those practices of colonization that transformed the globe since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Telling the history of these infrastructural media necessarily includes political history, a history of political economy and environmental history to show how “the Arctic is being rendered into a form of open geospatial data that can be mined by a broad spectrum of interests”.

To write about the Arctic today, as Ruiz notes, is itself an ambiguous project due to the “ambiguous function of the Arctic as both climate bellwether and resource panacea”. The “expeditionary incursions into uninhabited land” described in the text, can also be regarded as a result of global warming – and as an attempt to find new resources and evidence for the claims of climatologists. Colonization eats its children, but not before all uncolonized spaces have been colonized.

Nonetheless, the current global situation makes it possible for the critical analyst to observe large-scale infrastructures in the making. It is possible to observe media of colonization in actu in the form of IT systems of data retrieval, based on expanded infrastructures to collect and distribute data. But still, that what cannot be represented in a given system of representation, the excluded and unrepresentable, haunts the constitution of that system. Thus, the Arctic is loaded with evidentiary claims, data extraction and projection, new infrastructures and politics of knowledge – it is “morphing into a zone of significant knowledge production” with all the side effects such a transformation usually has. The Arctic appears as a dynamic, constantly changing and moving object rather than a frozen, silent, static region.

Consequently, it is important to question the position of the observer. What does it mean to observe a large infrastructure in the making, “before it becomes a smoothly functioning spatial information infrastructure that is transparent to use?” What does transparency mean here? In other words: Which position does the critical infrastructural

analyst have in the development of these infrastructures?

The methodological question stemming from this perspective concerns agency: How is the ability to act distributed among different actants in this process – and can we say that the ability to act is itself a product of these colonizing processes of accounting, registering and distributing? Ruiz, following the line of recent infrastructural studies, for example Keller Easterling, proposes to speak of “formative agency” and states that “the infrastructural both precedes and produces the logistical”. On the level of infrastructures, agency necessarily includes processes of formation, a creation of form that does not belong to anyone, but is a procedural result of large technological systems.