



Workshop Programme

Writing New Social Histories of Empires – Actors, Methods, and Archives

Monday, 26th January 2026 2 p.m.

For a long period, historiography has been predominantly shaped by national histories. Historians instinctively conceive and articulate their narratives within the confines of nation-states. The advent of “globalization” is progressively transforming methodologies. As borders have become increasingly permeable in contemporary society, and as interest in transnational dynamics escalates, the foundational tenets of methodological nationalism are undergoing rigorous scrutiny. This has opened new avenues for historians operating at the intersection of global histories, empire studies, and postcolonial studies. At this critical juncture, we ask historians if the older frameworks and categories of British social history concerning class, social stratification, popular movements, and collective movements studied within national frameworks are useful, and if so, in what manner they can be radically rethought, retooled, and provincialized through new readings of colonial legal and medical archives, vernacular texts, oral and visual sources, and material objects. This workshop brings together historians specializing in South Asia, Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. Their scholarship has privileged the experiences of weavers, butchers, seasonal and foreign workers, psychiatric patients, orphaned children, destitute women, and indigenous communities in order to reflect on questions of state formation, lawmaking, and the governance of mobility, borders, madness, childhood, sexuality, and the economy in colonial, postcolonial, and imperial contexts. By bringing together these historians, this workshop aims to foster conversations across diverse geographical and historiographical contexts and reflect on the varied experiences of subalternity and histories from below that have informed their work and their reading of the archives. It also explores ways in which categories of class can be broadened to address questions of migration, race, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and mental health in colonial, post-colonial, and imperial contexts. By centering on new social actors and processes that are often marginalized, the workshop also aims to ask newer questions of conventional political, economic, and institutional histories of state formation.

2.00 p.m. - 2.15 p.m.

Introductory comments

Miles Taylor

Professor of British History and Society, Centre for British Studies, HU Berlin

2.15 p.m. - 2.30 p.m.

“Taking Stock of Social History”

Vidhya Raveendranathan

Visiting Scholar, Centre for British Studies, HU Berlin

PANEL 1

LIFE HISTORIES – GENDER AND FAMILY

2.35 p.m. – 3.00 p.m.

Dr. Riley Linebaugh

Research Associate, Global History, University of Potsdam

Dr. Riley Linebaugh is a historian and archivist interested in imperial violence, postcolonial justice, and the relationships between archive-making and history-writing.

“‘Caesar’s Wives’: Secretaries, Secrecy, and Violence in the British Empire”

In 1962, the permanent secretary of the British colonial ministry of internal security and defence in Kenya, Geoffrey James Ellerton, praised his ministry’s efforts to conceal public records in a secret registry lest they “embarrass” the British government and their agents, especially with regard to the ‘Emergency’. Eventually, such efforts resulted in the mass displacement of an estimated 20,000 files from not just Kenya but 36 other colonial dependencies to London, where they remained, secretly, for decades. In a letter to the Governor’s Office, he boasted, “We like to think that in these matters we are as Caesar’s wife,” i.e., above suspicion. [1] Nameless, essential, unseen: Caesar’s wife is evoked as a handmaid of the British Empire, responsible for disappearing any evidence of its misdeeds in order to preserve a guise of integrity. The phrase, which raises themes of loyalty, secrecy, servitude, and power, is more than a metaphor. By the end of 1961, of the 34 members of Kenya’s colonial service with security

clearance to handle top-secret records, 15 were women, most of whom worked as personal secretaries to male officers. [2]

The existence and significance of female secretaries in the British Empire have been largely neglected in scholarship, as is often the case with secretarial work, which is both integral and oft overlooked. Moreover, however subordinated white female secretaries are in documents preserved by institutional archives, female colonial and racialized subjects are even more marginally represented in the preserved record. This marginal status within official archives illustrates a hierarchy of preserved perspectives rather than the non-activity of female colonial subjects, present in the “contact zones” of empire. This presentation discusses the use of composite biography and critical fabulation, whereby the life-writing documents of various women who worked as secretaries in British colonial settings would be reconstructed to address historiographical questions of gender, labor, and race within colonial administrations in relation to secret-keeping and violence.

[1] UK National Archives, FCO 141/6958, “Security of Official Correspondence,” Ministry of Defence:

Letter from Ellerton to Hennings, 17 April 1962.

[2] UK National Archives, FCO 141/6969, “Kenya: Security of Documents,” Circular from Thomas Neil,

“Security – List of Officers Authorised to see ‘Watch’ Material,” 13 December 1961.

3.00 p.m. – 3.25 p.m.

Prof. Dr. Nazan Maksudyan

Researcher at the Centre Marc Bloch (Berlin) in the ERC project

Dr. Nazan Maksudyan is a Researcher at the Centre Marc Bloch (Berlin) in the ERC project, 'Ottoman Auralities and the Eastern Mediterranean: Sound, Media and Power, 1789–1914' and a visiting professor at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research focuses on the social and cultural history of the late Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, with special interest in children and youth, exile and migration, and sound studies. is an Einstein Guest Professor at Freie Universität Berlin and research associate at the Centre

Marc Bloch. Her research focuses on the history of children and youth in the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

“Ottoman Orphans in Germany during World War I: A Microhistorical and Biographical Approach”

This paper takes a closer look at the life stories of these two brothers, Ali Haydar Dağlı and İsmail Necmi Dağlı, two of the orphans who went to Germany to receive vocational training during World War I. Following a (micro)biographical approach, I trace the life and work trajectories of Dağlı brothers during their four years in Germany and after their return to a dissolving Ottoman Empire. Reassessing my earlier research, I question how different methodologies and sources can add nuance to our interpretations. The conclusions of my original research, which were largely based on German and Ottoman state archives, pointed to an overwhelming picture of "failure" in official accounts from both sides. In the present paper, I construct the history of Ottoman apprentices in Germany using the methods of microhistory, family history, and oral history through family archives, oral sources, and visual documentation. In this version, the life story reconstructions of Ali and İsmail Dağlı illustrate the "success" that both the German and Ottoman sides of this plan for long-term child displacement hoped to achieve.

3.30 p.m. – 3.45 p.m. Discussion

PANEL 2

SOCIAL HISTORIES OF THE POLITICAL

3.50 p.m. – 4.15 p.m.

Dr. Romain Tiquet

Senior Researcher, CNRS/IMAF, Bard College

Dr. Romain Tiquet is the Principle Investigator of the ERC project Governing Madness in West Africa, which examines histories of madness and decolonization in several African territories. His previous work has focused on forced labour and prisons in Senegal.

Thinking Through Cases: Writing a Political and Social History of West Africa through Psychiatric Records.

How do the dreams of a former tirailleur, interned in a psychiatric institution, open up new perspectives on the decolonization wars in Algeria and Indochina? In what ways do the poems of a young Senegalese patient offer insights into the political and social life of Senegal at the moment of independence?

This presentation aims to examine how the analysis of patient records from the psychiatric clinic of Fann (Dakar, Senegal) can contribute to reconstructing a social history of the postcolonial transition in West Africa.

4.20 p.m. – 4.45 p.m.

Dr. Soheb Niazi

Gerda Henkel Postdoc Fellow, Friedrich-Meinecke Institute, Freie Universität Berlin

Dr. Soheb Niazi specialises in the social and economic history of modern India with a focus on non-elite Muslim actors. His current research project investigates the histories of meat, hides and leather industries in colonial India.

Beyond Nationalism and Separatism: Political and Social Histories of Subaltern Muslims in Colonial India

The first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of numerous social and political organizations led by subaltern Muslim occupational castes known as the *peshewar birādarī*. These *peshewar* Muslims contested the genealogical assertions of a broad class of *sayyid* and *ashrāf* (elite) Muslims, engaging them in a prominent public polemical discourse that captivated the Urdu public sphere during the early decades of the twentieth century. This paper traces the history of three political associations led by Muslim *peshewar birādarīs*: the Qassābs (butchers, meat/hides/skins traders), Ansaris (weavers), and Mirasīs (musicians). These political associations aimed to critique and challenge the political hegemony of the *ashrāf* elite and to forge a politics of *masāwāt* (equality) as a normative principle within the Islamic tradition.

This social and political history is documented through a close reading of vernacular sources in Urdu, such as community histories, newspaper reports, and local archives, which enable a reading of the colonial archives that goes against the grain. In doing so, the paper complicates the historiography of Muslims in South Asia, which has predominantly relied on accounts of elite (*ashrāf*) individuals or institutions. These accounts often underscore the religious aspects of their identities, framing their lifeworlds within the binaries of nationalism and separatism. However, the contested polemical discourse within the Urdu public sphere emphasizes how the political alignment of different occupational castes and their stance toward mainstream national-oriented politics was often shaped by economic interests and the prevailing local configurations of power.

4.45 p.m. – 5.00 p.m. Discussion

5.00 p.m. – 5.10 p.m. Tea Break

PANEL 3

LAW AND REGULATION

5.15 p.m. – 5.40 p.m.

Dr. Reemu Ray

Max-Planck-Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, Frankfurt/M

Dr. Reemu Ray heads the Centre for Legal History of India in the Department of European and comparative Legal History. She is currently working on 19th century colonial laws, spatial infrastructure of legal institutions, and practices of jurisdiction in the British empire.

Exclusion in Three Acts

This paper explores the relationship between the local application of “laws of exclusion” in the patchy imperial frontiers and the consolidation of an overarching jurisprudence of “minority” subjects of law. The paper begins with a discussion of what I describe as “laws of exclusion” in the colonial provinces of Bengal and Assam in the early 19th century, which evolved into colony-wide constitutional provisions in the Government of India Act 1935. This paper examines the uneven legal geography that culminated in the India Act, with a particular focus on the creation of “Excluded Areas.” Further, the paper explores how subjects in excluded areas consolidated themselves as political actors. The paper departs from the existing historiography of law in colonial India that largely focuses on directly ruled areas. Even in the examination of the “variegated legal spaces of empire” in Lauren Benton’s work, for instance, directly ruled areas of British India find prominence. Advancing my previous work on non-regulated areas in the northeastern frontiers of Bengal in the early 19th century, this paper examines excluded areas as defined in the India Act 1935 in relation to two previous legislations: 1919 GOI Act and the 1874 Scheduled Districts Act. The paper traces how successive laws of exclusion were produced, the nature of legislative and jurisdictional exceptions, and how subjects of excluded areas engaged with such laws.

5.45 p.m. – 6.10 p.m.

Dr. İlkey Yılmaz

Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin

Dr. İlkey Yılmaz is currently a DFG-funded research associate and has conducted research on passport history, inter-, imperial collaboration of policing, security history, and the history of violence in the Ottoman Empire.

Mobilities, Marginalities, and Agency: Ordinary People and State Power in the Late Ottoman World

This paper examines the relationship between mobility, marginality, and state power in the late Ottoman Empire by centering on the experiences and agency of ordinary people—migrants, refugees, itinerant workers, and minority populations. Drawing on extensive archival research, it explores how individuals navigated, negotiated, and at times subverted emerging regimes of control, including passports, policing, and surveillance. Rather than treating mobility solely as an object of regulation, the paper

conceptualizes it as a dynamic field of interaction between state authorities and mobile populations. It shows that ordinary people were not passive recipients of state power but active participants who shaped legal practices and administrative outcomes through everyday acts of compliance, evasion, petitioning, and movement. These interactions reveal how marginal groups influenced the implementation of security measures and exposed the limits of state capacity. By situating Ottoman mobility regimes within broader European and global histories of migration control and state formation, the paper challenges narratives that portray the Ottoman Empire as exceptional or peripheral. Instead, it demonstrates how Ottoman practices of governing mobility were part of wider transimperial trends in managing population movement, security, and difference. Ultimately, this paper argues that focusing on mobilities and marginalities offers a new lens for understanding modern state formation; one that highlights the central role of ordinary people in producing, contesting, and reshaping systems of governance. In doing so, it contributes to interdisciplinary debates in history, migration studies, empire, and the study of security and state violence.

6.15 p.m. - 6.30 p.m. Discussion

6.30 p.m. – 7.15 p.m. Going Forward

“What Next for Social History?”

Discussion and brainstorming sessions