

Materialities of Empire

reading global history in our tangible worlds

Course description

What can looking at materialities teach us about changing political empires?

Global history is characterized by changing and competing empires. What material impact these empires have on political realities and daily lives is a central inquiry for both political historians and anthropologists. This course reverses the question: how does matter shape these political realities, how does it change the course of empires and global history?

After diving into both the definitions of 'empire' and 'materialities', this course will address a multitude of geographies, both contemporary and historical - from the installation of telegraph lines in the Ottoman Empire to cement in mandate Palestine and 21st century data-centers in Ireland. A material approach to political history brings new perspectives on how empires take shape and change. Following materials allows for tying local specificities to global development and vice versa, and weaving a complex web of global politics to navigate.

The goal of this course is to thus to both develop an understanding of the theoretical fields that deal with materialities, political realities and global history, and develop a research attitude that attunes to detail to gain unexpected insights and analysis. At the end of the course, the students will be able to use the theoretical background to read global history from their immediate surroundings.

Fellow

Lies T. Defever studied anthropology and architecture in Amsterdam and Paris, and has a deep love for history. She mostly researches what architecture and construction projects tell us about changing power relations, and writes about how we can understand imperia and their histories through their material connections. Her work sits at the intersection of political and material anthropology on the one hand and critical architecture theory and history on the other. Occasionally she presents her photography work on construction.

Course flow

sessions 1 to 5: *genealogy of thought*. Leading questions:

- What is empire to us? What are different ways of theoretically approaching 'empire'?
- What possibilities does it open to foreground materials? What are the theoretical currents on material thinking? How do they differ and give us different outcomes/ways of analyzing?

session 1: Empire I: what is empire to us?

- **reading:** none

session 2: Empire II: what is empire to us? What are different ways of theoretically approaching 'empire'?

- **reading:** Wesley Renfro and Dominic Alessio, "Empire?" (2020)

session 3: Materialities I: materialism and new materialism

- **reading:** Joyce and Bennett, "Material Powers. Introduction" (2010)

session 4: materialities II: STS and the material *tout-monde*

- **reading:** Agard-Jones, Vanessa. "Bodies in the System." (2013)

session 5: materialities III: assemblages and the material semiotic knot

- **reading:** Anna Tsing, from *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015):
 - 1: Arts of Noticing
 - 2: Contamination as Collaboration
- optional: 3: some problems with scale

BREAK for Eid

6 tot 10: *into the world*

leading questions:

- diversify topics and focuses in material thinking, today and in history.
- Link readings/viewings back to part I.
- Develop your own research attitude, Start to think of your own project.

session 6: thinking from the landscape:

- **reading:** Jennifer Derr, from *The Lived Nile. Environment, disease and material colonial economy in Egypt* (2019): "A River, Remade: Making Subjects on the Perennial Nile"

session 7: thinking from the built environment:

- **reading:**
 - Nasser Abourahme. “Assembling and Spilling-Over: Towards an ‘Ethnography of Cement’ in a Palestinian Refugee Camp” (2014)
 - AND
 - Nimrod Ben Ze’ev. “Palestine along the colour line: race, colonialism, and construction labour, 1918–1948” (2021)

session 8 (June 16 or 17): **thinking from seas**

- **reading:**
 - Miriam Matthiessen and Jacob Bolton. “Shipping Doesn’t Do What Everyone Says it Does. For container shipping companies, the supply chain crisis was never a crisis: it was a buffet” (2023)
 - OR
 - Sekula, *A Fish Story*. (1995)
 - OR
 - Laleh Khalili, from *Sinews of War and Trade. Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (2020): “Palimpsests of Law and Corporate Sovereigns”

session 9 (June 23 or 24): **thinking with energy**

- **reading: TBA**

session 10 (June 30 or July 1): **thinking with technologies:**

- **reading:**
 - Pauline Lucy Lewis, from *Wired Ottomans: A Sociotechnical History of the Telegraph and the Modern Ottoman Empire, 1855-1911* (2018): “Ottoman Telegraphy and New Conceptions of Space and Time
 - OR
 - TBA

session 11: PROJECT PREPARATIONS - walk-in session

session 12: PROJECT PRESENTATIONS