

AREA STUDIES AND ITS DISCONTENTS

MESAAS Graduate Student Conference, **22-23rd February 2018**

Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies (MESAAS)

Columbia University in the City of New York

Submission Deadline: **January 2nd, 2018**

As scholars engaged in the study of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, we are frequently confronted with a shared set of theoretical challenges: What epistemologies do we employ? On what terms may we connect, compare and contrast conceptual vocabularies sourced from across these regions? How do colonial structures and rubrics intervene in our scholarship, and is it possible to think past them?

At this year's MESAAS Graduate Student Conference 2018, we hope to probe these questions through the lens of a few discrete themes outlined below. In thinking through these questions, we hope to build a repertory of integrative modes of researching these regions that transcends the orthodox model of area studies. Is it possible to constitute the study of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia in a manner that would exceed the sum of its 'area studies' parts? Around what set of theoretical questions could such an integration be attempted?

We are pleased to invite abstract submissions for the MESAAS Graduate Student Conference 2018 that engage these questions. The conference will take place on 22-23rd February, at Columbia University in the City of New York. We invite graduate students, scholars and activists of all disciplines and stages of study related to Africa, the Middle East and South Asia to present their latest research on the following topics to a supportive, critical audience:

Building on Postcolonial Theory

Is Postcolonial Theory a unified field of inquiry? Is there such a thing as a postcolonial epistemology? How do we conceptualize the different methodologies and orientations of various postcolonial scholars who study different regions? Is the goal of postcolonial theory(ies) to construct a model, or is the notion of the model precisely that which postcolonial theorists must challenge? If so, should we think of postcolonial theory as a field, method, epistemology, political commitment, or something else altogether?

Translation and Its Dilemmas

How are concepts used to translate one life world into another? What are the methods and problems of employing concepts that have emerged in one part of the world to make sense of lifeworlds in the regions that we study? What are the limits of trying to capture a concept with the languages of modern social sciences?

Genealogies of Colonial Social Categories

Edward Said wrote that "Having moved from one place and time to another, an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength" so that it becomes "altogether different for another period or situation." Is the same true of colonial social categories? If social categories travel from one

colonial situation to another, does this destabilize or reinforce the political currency of their applicability? This leads us to ask what is the relationship between genealogy and history? Is there a necessary opposition between doing genealogy and doing history? How does each enable and limit the postcolonial scholar? How should colonial categories be confronted? Should scholars oppose them by using ‘indigenous’ categories, newly constructed categories, or by rejecting categorization altogether?

Time and its Modalities

Can the concepts, causalities and practices that we study employ a conception of time that is godless, continuous and homogeneous? If not, what are the ways in which we understand time? How do different temporal structures affect the possibility of histories? How do we account for diversity in sources of concepts if we take as fundamental to our research the temporal specifics of these concepts?

Claim Making in Africa, Middle East, South Asia

Given that the dominant language of political modernity in the West is not easily translatable to societies elsewhere, how do we study claims made on institutions, communities and polities in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia? What, if any, are the techniques and practices employed to respond to these claims?

The de-reception of modern law in the post-colony

Scholarly accounts abound of the use of modern law as an instrument of colonial domination, of the durable regimes of violence – ranging from the epistemic to the genocidal- unleashed by its categories, and of its enduring legacies which pattern the world we live in. However, we have a less clear picture of the manifold ways in which modern law has come, after colonialism, to be subverted, indeed ‘de-received’ (invoking a term coined by the post-colonial theorist Upendra Baxi) at many of the sites of its introduction. We may formulate this scholarly gap into questions using language repurposed from the historian Gyan Prakash: In what ways, and to what effect, have colonial legal categories been “dislocated and transformed” in the contemporary? How have their “writs of rationality and order” been overwritten, their “assertions of universality” been qualified? In what ways does the discipline of analytical jurisprudence, favoured by university curricula, continue to secure colonial law against its decay?

In addition, papers are also invited on the following topics:

- Islam/s and Modernity/ies
- Gender and Empire

Those interested in submitting a paper are requested to upload and submit a 300 word abstract on our conference website: <http://mesaasgradconference.cdrs.columbia.edu> by **January 2nd, 2018**. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by mid January. For other inquiries, please contact us via: mesaasgradconference@gmail.com