The production of imperial space. Empire and Circulations (18th-20th centuries)

Empires are often presented as State structures with specific relations to space, as they tend to expand through progressive accretion of territory. Imperial spaces are supposed to be strongly hierarchical, divided between centres and peripheries, with highly militarized border areas and buffer zones. In this framework, empires are primarily defined by their ability to establish their sovereignty over a specific space, which entails control over territories and the populations that inhabit them, as well as over the flows of goods and people that develop in this space.

While it is important to take into account the role of the State in structuring imperial space, the workshop proposes to study the multiplicity of processes and actors involved in the production of such a space. Henri Lefebvre’s conception of social space has been especially significant in drawing attention to the different mechanisms involved in the production of space, which he identified as spatial practices (of each member of a society), representation of space (the “conceptual space” of scientists and planners) and representational space (the space of the “inhabitants”, lived through images and symbols). Lefebvre also contended that the constitution of new spaces did not lead to the disappearance of pre-existing ones. Such insights into the complexity and multilayeredness of social space provide the basis for an inquiry into the specificity of imperial space, and of the processes contributing to its constitution.

The workshop intends to focus on circulation as an entry point to study the imbrication of spaces, of space-producing activities, and of actors, in an imperial context. A “spatial practice” par excellence, circulation produces spaces of its own, both at its most local and at its most global scale. The imperial space is itself constituted through a multiplicity of circulations: flows of legal and regulatory practices as well as of imperial personnel constitute the administrative and political space of the empire; circulations of goods and of labor shape its economic space. In addition, circulation of explorers and surveyors, and the various survey reports, travelogues and cartographic representations they produced underlie its cognitive space. The workshop adopts a broad definition of circulation, looking at the movement of peoples and goods, of information, knowledge, techniques, cultural productions and practices which constitute the circulatory regime of a given society, a regime that is constantly reconstituted in response to wider economic, social and political processes.
The workshop especially proposes two lines of enquiry

1- Imperial spaces are neither singular, nor coherent, but are constituted of many nested spaces, produced through the interaction of various actors. The imperial State is only one among several actors who take part into the production of this imperial space. Through processes of imperial expansion and consolidation, the imperial State does usher in the spatial reorganisation of the territories that come under its ambit to serve its own economic, administrative and political interests. However, the Empire’s power over space is shaped by constant negotiations with local intermediaries and further contends with diverse practices of appropriation and subversion of space.

2- Imperial space is only one among many spaces that exist within and beyond. These different spaces coexist and overlap, compete or become intertwined. Circulatory practice – regional, cross-border, and transimperial – lead to the constitution of parallel spaces. Be it the circulation of experts or indentured workers, of technical or administrative knowledge, transimperial circulations contrive to link distant territories, each under distinct sovereignties. Similarly, any given space is set within multiple temporalities, as past circulatory practices continue to interact with new imperial circulatory regimes.

The workshop aims to develop a comparative approach to foster exchange between PhD students, post-doctoral fellows and researchers working on imperial structures that traditional taxonomies have tended to segregate; i.e. continental, colonial and maritime empires. A rather broad chronological focus, spanning the end of the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century will allow us to capture different imperial formations at different stage of their evolution. By this mean we may explore the relationship between empire and circulation, and its reconfiguration, through different contexts and at different historical moments.

The workshop will especially welcome contributions that explore the intertwinement of spaces and actors. Papers could also go beyond a strictly imperial temporal framework, looking at circulations antedating the development of the empire, as well as studying the posterity of imperial circulatory regimes. With a view to explore the plurality of imperial spaces, different scales of analysis need to be deployed, relying on manifold sources both in terms of their nature, and of the scale of activity, as well as the actors involved. Administrative sources could thus be paired with literary ones, travelogues and maps, pictorial representations as well as folklore and, for the more recent periods, oral history.

The following themes could, among others, be explored by different contributors

- imperial circulatory regimes (economic, political, administrative, cognitive…) and the processes of structuration of the imperial space (shifts and changes in spatial hierarchies, at different levels of the empire)
- development of communication infrastructures, as both tools to control territories and objects of negotiations and contestations
- discrimination between circulatory practices: fostering some (indenture and labor migration, opening the “interiors” and development of trade) and preventing others (sedentarisation of populations, criminalisation of peripatetic modes of life…)
- Imperial frontier, buffer zones and circulation across borders
- Trans-imperial circulations: development of regional linkages between empires, involving a multiplicity of actors (labor migrants and imperial experts, techniques and scientific knowledge, administrative practices…)
- Circulation and crisis: intensification of circulatory practices or breaches in circulatory regimes (crisis in the imperial system, but also sanitary, political, social, environmental crisis…)
Application process:

Paper abstract of **500 words max.** and **Curriculum Vitae** should be sent to colloquium.circulation@gmail.com **by June, the 1st 2017.**

Every applicant will be informed by early August of the results of the selection process. Travel and housing expenses of the selected participants will be covered.

Organizers:

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