

## **After Eurocentrism, Beyond Decentring Themes and Methodologies for an Interdisciplinary History of Ideas**

Workshop at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg, 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2016

Coordinators:  
**Benjamin Zachariah**  
University of Trier  
&  
**Hans Harder**  
Heidelberg University

**Anup Grewal**, University of Toronto \* **Javed Majeed**, King's College, London \* **Joachim Kurtz**, Heidelberg University \* **Pablo Blitstein**, Heidelberg University \* **Sudipta Kaviraj**, Columbia University, New York (over Skype) \* **Kavita Philip**, University of California, Irvine & MPI für Wissenschaftsgeschichte \* **Dhruv Raina**, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi \* **Benjamin Zachariah**, University of Trier \* **Hans Harder**, Heidelberg University

### **Summary**

The kernel of the workshop is to discuss the movement of ideas, and the difficulties, archival, methodological and disciplinary, of tracking them as they move. The workshop brings together a number of academics from two different area studies specialisations and several disciplines: South Asian Studies and East Asian Studies; historians, historians and philosophers of science, literary scholars, political scientists and sociologists, who have for some years been engaged in tracking ideas as they move across linguistic, state, national or 'cultural' boundaries in their work.

Our starting point is that a blanket critique of 'Eurocentrism', which is several decades old now, has by now lost its bite, and a contrary danger of indigenism has now to be confronted. This danger of indigenism has been acute in the two area studies specialisations represented at this workshop, East Asian Studies and South Asian Studies, the latter perhaps dominated slightly more by India than the former by China. A process of recovery of methodological discussions must take place that is no longer content merely with critique and rejection, but attempts to provide constructive suggestions as to how to write about moving ideas, their adoption, adaptation to different contexts, or appropriation to new purposes. Different disciplinary formations have been attuned to various factors which other disciplines could potentially learn from, and the workshop brings the disciplines into dialogue.

### **Current state of research**

There have been very few systematic discussions on the movements of ideas across boundaries, and in particular discussions outside the domains of European or North American scholarship. A few examples of exploring the influence of a set of ideas in new contexts exist from widely disparate times (e.g. for South Asian studies Stokes 1959, Guha 1963, Forbes 1975, Kaviraj 1995, 2010, 2011, 2012, Zachariah 2005, Sartori 2008) but methodological discussions have yet to take off without imposing on the ideas an 'original' and 'copy' model that then reinstates the Eurocentrism we are supposedly now beyond. The point of abstractions is that they travel more easily than material things; being abstract, they are also more flexible. Intellectual history, or the history of ideas, has been an under-researched field in general in the area studies fields we know,

though perhaps certain Latin American models could work for South Asian or East Asian studies (e.g. Finchelstein 2013), even if some of this literature has not been well-received in Latin American studies itself.

Moreover, disciplinary formations have not collaborated particularly well: the ‘history’ in ‘intellectual history’ should not be taken to mean that it is the domain of historians alone. On the contrary, literary scholars have long had an important role to play, in particular in being more sensitive to genre or to different discursive formations than most historians have been (Majeed, Harder); and political scientists have done much of the important work in identifying modes of legitimation (Kaviraj) and frames of understanding (Harder) or the ‘domestication’ of ideas in new contexts (Raina and Habib). Historians and philosophers of science have of course been more sensitive to the non-nation-state-boundedness of ideas, given the pretensions to universalism of scientific thought (see Philip); but they in turn have long had to deal with hard assumptions about the ‘Western’ origins of scientific rationality, the indigenism of the claim that there were ancients-who-were-already-modern (in India or China). Attempts to draw on methodological discussions from their still-very-European or at least often monolingual contexts – such as *Begriffsgeschichte* (Kaviraj, Blitstein) have not yet been widely circulated, nor discussed in the context of the difficulties of multilingualism or the divided nature of discussions in an otherwise-assumed homogenous context where audiences are taken for granted (Brunner, Conze, Koselleck). Again, a Skinner/Pocock approach, where intentionality has been problematized by its critics, has yet to be analysed in terms of the simultaneous addressing of different audiences, in the same or different languages; or the problems of reading implicit assumptions of a ‘discourse’ in the Foucauldian sense, mapped onto a Barthesian semiotic analysis of the surplus meaning of words that have different, and multilingual resonances (Zachariah, forthcoming). Questions of difficult and unconventional sources that illuminate or explain previously opaque areas of intellectual enquiry need to be discussed alongside these other problems.

This workshop brings many of the central protagonists in a nascent debate into dialogue: we are not inventing or pioneering a field so much as attempting to rescue and recover what has been discussed so far, and to systematise some of its stray insights, which are sometimes not evident as insights to their authors, given that an individual author is constrained by his or her own area and discipline. Many of us have been in communication in various contexts for several years now; a preliminary workshop on connected themes involving some of the people in the workshop we now propose took place in Berlin in 2012.

The implications of the discussions are of potential importance outside the disciplines and areas represented at the workshop: a widening and deepening of debates that take place in the ‘periphery’ can also be influential to the ‘centre’, wherever that might now be, perhaps in terms of academic power rather than in geographical terms.

## Abstracts:

### Anup Grewal

#### **Subaltern Labouring Bodies and Machines in 1930s Socialist Poetics: From Xia Yan’s “Contract Labour” to Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*.**

The relationship between human labouring bodies and machines is central to visions of socialist alternatives to capitalist modernity. I examine Xia Yan’s literary reportage “Contract Labour” (1936) and Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Untouchable* (1935) to explore the imagination of this relationship in 1930s’ socialist literature transnationally. Both works focus on subaltern figures labouring in spaces hidden from yet central to maintaining the current economic and social machinery. While Xia Yan depicts the lives of women indentured in Shanghai’s cotton mills, Anand details the life of a young untouchable sweeper in colonial India. Steeped in the imagery of humans as, with, and in relation to machines, these texts narrate the exploitation of subaltern labourers while suggesting their possible emergence as harbingers of a socialist future. Both

works centre on textile mechanisation and the sartorial dimensions of oppression and liberation. Xia Yan's analysis of the cotton mills that were, for Chinese Marxists, key to the capitalist-imperialist-feudalist nexus, also evokes the relationship between regimes of fashion and these exploited female labourers. In *Untouchable*, Bakha's dreams of dressing like a British soldier turn into a dialogue between Gandhi's call to return to hand-spun cotton as a route to social equality and national liberation from colonialism, and a Marxist's suggestion that mechanised labour can replace untouchable labour and lead to an alternative future. Together these texts reveal global perspectives on the politics and poetics of socialist modernity. Through their different narrative modes, they highlight 1930s' socialist literary experiments in 'depicting reality in its revolutionary development.'

**Javed Majeed**

**“Everything built on moonshine”<sup>1</sup> – love and revolution in Islamic modernist and socialist poetry**

My paper examines the contrasting ideas of love and revolution in Muhammad Iqbal's (1877-1938) poetry of Islamic modernism and Faiz Ahmed Faiz's (1910-84) socialistically orientated Urdu lyrics. In examining the different political and stylistic commitments of Iqbal and Faiz, it draws on debates about the role of affective solidarity in socialist and other political movements, the problematic relationships between eroticism and political commitment, and the idea of love as a cross-cultural but locally inflected problematic. “Affective mapping” in creating bonds of solidarity is central to Faiz's and Iqbal's poetry, but this takes starkly different forms in their work, and both also fashion very different notions of selfhood in their lyrics. More particularly, their poetry illuminates the issues raised by Mao when he considered the nature of politically committed literature in his ‘Talks at Yan'an’ (1942). Here comparisons with the work of Zong Pu (such as ‘Red Beans’, 1952), Xiao Hong's *Field of Life and Death* (1934) and Ding Ling's *Shanghai, Spring* (1930) in terms of how they negotiated questions of love, sexuality and political dedication in their texts are instructive. The paper will draw some conclusions on how Faiz's and Iqbal's approaches to writing love and techniques of rendering political commitment illuminate the themes and methodologies of a history of ideas and motifs across disciplines, languages and cultures.

**Joachim Kurtz**

**Sovereignty Lies in Heaven: Confucian Revivalism and the Re-enchantment of China's Political Order**

For most of the twentieth century, conservative Chinese thinkers worked to prove the compatibility of traditional ethical insights with the precepts of a modern and more or less democratic polity. From the early 1920s through the 1980s efforts to defend and rejuvenate Confucian thought aimed, with few exceptions, at a reformulation that rendered it conducive to a fuller realization of popular sovereignty broadly conceived. Only in recent decades have these moderate attempts been challenged by a self-conscious fundamentalist revivalism that aims to restore a ‘purer’ version of the Confucian doctrine. At the heart of this revisionist enterprise lies an alternative model of sovereignty that draws as much on selective adaptations of a peculiar strand of ancient and early modern Confucian ideas as on European or Islamic calls for a new political theology. Focusing on Jiang Qing (\*1953), the major propagator of a more muscular “political Confucianism” and a vitriolic critic of earlier generations of “modern Neo-Confucians” (*dangdai xin rujia*), this paper will reconstruct the aims and inspirations of his anti-modernist visions of a utopian constitutional order, situate them within the larger context of modern

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<sup>1</sup> This is how Karl Marx described his own attempts at lyric poetry; Karl Marx to Heinrich Marx, 10. Nov 1837, cited in S.S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford, 1976).

Chinese conservatism, and probe the reasons for their surprising domestic and international popularity.

**Pablo Ariel Blitstein**

**The concept of “culture” between court politics and financial politics**

How are ideas rooted in singular experiences of space? Instead of asking whether ideas have a particular “origin,” whether they are “national” or “global,” “universal” or “local,” I will attempt to understand how they are practically related to the *localized* social experiences of the actors involved. This presentation thus proposes to explore this general question at the scale of a single idea and a single person in the first decade of the twentieth century: the idea at stake is “culture,” and the person is Kang Youwei, a leading figure in the development of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chinese political thought. I will show the role two particular places played in the development of Kang Youwei’s idea of “culture”: the “court” on the one hand, and his “New China” in Mexico on the other. These two places were associated with two different ways of doing politics, “court politics” and “financial politics,” which were the source of Kang Youwei’s understanding of “culture”—and, with it, of “race” and “nation.” The idea of “culture,” as I intend to show, was a category for social and political action whose definition was rooted in both a space of experience and an experience of space.

**Kavita Philip**

**How to Follow Concept and Practice through Science, Technology, and Society:  
Methodological Notes from Undisciplined Histories of Science**

Winning independence from the British in 1947, India began its nation-building at the cross-roads of empire. As the sun was setting on the British Empire, it was rising on the Cold War and a Bretton-Woods model of US-led global geopolitics. The newly independent Indian state was largely poor, underdeveloped, and agrarian, and committed in principle to the egalitarian distribution of land and wealth. Yet, by the end of the century, India was world-renowned more for its urban technologists than for its rural farmers, and for the rapid growth of wealth in highly developed urban sites. Popular commentary traces this shift to the early 1990s and the role of International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans in opening up the Indian economy. Political economists have contested the idea that there was one moment of transition, chronicling a more gradual market liberalization through the late twentieth century. The role of technology has remained largely under-theorized in these popular and scholarly accounts. As a result, Indian technologists now appear as historical singularities, seemingly emerging out of nowhere to catapult the nation to the forefront of emerging economies in the new millennium.<sup>2</sup> India’s spectacular representations in global media today has much to do with this seemingly magical appearance of geeks, appearing to transform India overnight, from failure to success.

In nineteenth-century India, colonial anthropologists, concerned with the collection and preservation of the primitive, often spoke on behalf of the native. By the middle of the twentieth century, authority on backward spaces had passed to economic development theorists such as Walt Rostow and neo-Malthusian population theorists such as Paul Ehrlich, who reflected on the place of primitive economies in the larger drama of post-World War II development. At the turn

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<sup>2</sup> South Asian historical scholarship has begun to move away from the focus on the colonial period, to shed light on post-Independence India. Ethnographic work on Indian engineers and designers is now extensive (Irani 2013). The need for a longer historical study of technology policy in India remains.

of the twenty-first century, IT-executives displaced political economists. Information technologists emerged as the new universal experts on global development.

In order to understand South Asian history of science, researchers must, then, follow concepts and practices through each of these fields – a journey which weaves the research trajectory across university disciplines, in and out of the worlds of corporate, technological, and activist practice, towards speculative theory, and back to archival empiricism. How might we understand such an undisciplined practice? How might we generalize from the experiences of researchers in South Asian history of science to articulate a model that is replicable, rather than one that depends on the accidental skills and findings of multi-disciplinary researchers working outside the frame of academic disciplines?

This paper introduces a case study and makes a first step toward articulating such a framework. It tracks the mixtures, borrowings, practical consequences, and discursive overlaps among various meanings of science, technology, and economic development, each usually told in a different discipline (Anthropology, Development Economics, and Science and Technology Studies (STS) or its more practical cousin, ICT4D). Each of these histories has been well chronicled in its own disciplinary framework; my aim is neither to summarize, adding them up cumulatively; nor to produce another chronology of transition. Rather, it is to make visible the seams and points of articulation among these discourses, to show how each became thinkable only in terms of the other in a particular historical moment. Rather than modelling the postcolonial world, the point is to ask why and how, historically, it has seemed necessary to model the spaces of de-colonization through science, technology, and economics, and what politics become (un)thinkable via these modelling practices.

**Dhruv Raina**

### **On 'Conversions' and Contexts: From Biographies to the Sociology of Intellectuals**

This essay has two parts – the first third puts in context two major moments within the history of science challenging the premises of Eurocentric history of science and the landscapes of history and theory within which they were situated. The rest of the essay deals with the difficulty of writing intellectual biography of scientists in contemporary South Asia, while taking cognisance of the historiographic consequences of these moments. Very briefly the paper outlines the aborted attempts to write the biographies of Visvesvariah, who in earlier work I had labelled a sociologist-engineer and Amulya Reddy, the electrochemist turned science and energy policy analyst. Their autobiographical accounts are framed by the notions of 'conversions to'<sup>3</sup> and 'promotion and development of' systems, movements and theories. The associated movements and ideas were scaffolded in twentieth century social theory proper and social theory of science. Reddy in particular provides a context to his own intellectual development. In other words, there is a self-fulfilling telos that structures the narrativisation of a life – or to rephrase Steve Fuller the model edifying life '... may be led by becoming the sort of person one writes about with favour'. But much of that social theoretic context has now been revised by developments in the social theory of science and history of South Asia over the last two decades. These changes have sometimes metamorphosed the genre of heroic biography into villainous biography – a transformation less frequently witnessed in Europe. This has led some of my students to go back to a much discredited method in the history of sciences, namely prosopography, in order to link scientific careers with networks, institutions (including schools and colleges) with regions. At the outset they quite understand that in the early twentieth century science was an elite activity, though those associated with it comprised a social elite if not an economic elite. And yet they also have to engage with the

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<sup>3</sup> This throws up an analogy between the genre of scientific biography and the life of saints.

fascination of the pursuit of science. This movement from heroic biography premised on the idea of conversions or what Lyotard had called science as a narrative of redemption, to locations, sites and spaces knowledge may have something more towards the unpacking of sociology of intellectuals

### **Benjamin Zachariah**

#### **Intellectual Histories and Decentred Biographies: escaping the historiography of Gandhism through the life of Gandhi**

This paper attempts to decentre its central protagonist, and thereby to introduce and restore the larger historical contexts in which he operated – contexts that are often lost in purely biographical writing. Can we speak here of atypical exemplars or microcosmic intellectuals? The point here is to place Gandhi in the context of the social and political movements of which he became (often but not always) the pivotal point. A decentring of the central figure has its advantages. The context that usually appears as background can be brought to the foreground, thereby subverting the biographical genre's tendency to reify the 'great man' theme, leading us away from the 'biographical illusion' and its inevitable linear rendition of the development of greatness, and moving instead towards a 'man-makes-his-own-history-but-not-in-circumstances-of-their-own-choosing' approach. If we can avoid focusing merely on the exceptional in the life and work of an extremely exceptional and charismatic character, we might instead glimpse a late Victorian romantic anti-capitalist milieu, a contradictory set of engagements with anarchism, utopian socialism, nationalist parochialism, an Orientalist imagination internalised and strategically used, aspects of imperial racisms and sub-racisms, pre- and post-First World War authoritarianism and anti-parliamentarianism, to name just a few themes. This approach throws up various methodological conundrums that I should like to discuss at the workshop.

### **Hans Harder**

#### **When Ideas Get Stuck in the Idiom, or Don't Sink Deep when Thrown into it: Problems of Intellectual History in Regional Languages of Modern South Asia**

When it comes to concept history, the status of the non-English regional languages in modern South Asia is ill-determined and problematic. These numerous languages could be described either as a reservoir of conceptual alternatives to Anglophone globalization or as a barren field of second-hand, hybridized conceptual spare parts. Both these positions would of course come with heavy ideological baggage, but the former would outweigh the latter. For, as a matter of fact, a long-standing coexistence with transregional languages such as English at present, and Sanskrit and Persian in the past, has led to a division of labour between them and put the regional languages on the receiving end of conceptual trajectories. Their function comes down, broadly speaking, to carrying forth received concepts from the remote past or integrating ones from the global present.

So where should one locate concept history in languages which are the mother tongues of almost one-fourth of mankind today, but into which so far little first-hand conceptual investment has been made? Especially when the attempts at such investment, riding on the high tide of anti-colonial self-assertion, have largely given way to postcolonial Anglophonia in sub-continental intellectual ambits? Is intellectual history thus bound to become an archaeology in Foucault's sense, sifting through sediments of downward translation rather than chasing for instances of conceptual sharpening?

This paper will work its way through these assertions and questions, trying to steer clear of the indigenous trap of celebrating linguistic alterity as a value in itself, but also of the temptation to treat modern South Asian languages merely as a trash yard of global concepts. The

aim is to assert the need and delimit the space of concept history even in a field where in so many cases ideas get stuck in the idiom, or don't sink deep when thrown into it.

## Schedule

### Friday July 1, 2016

2 pm Welcome (Hans Harder, Benjamin Zachariah)

2:30-4

**Anup Grewal:** Subaltern Labouring Bodies and Machines in 1930s Socialist Poetics: From Xia Yan's "Contract Labour" to Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.

**Javed Majeed:** "Everything built on moonshine"—love and revolution in Islamic modernist and socialist poetry)

*coffee / tea*

4:30-6

**Joachim Kurtz:** Sovereignty Lies in Heaven: Confucian Revivalism and the Re-enchantment of China's Political Order

**Pablo Blitstein:** The concept of "culture" between court politics and financial politics)

*coffee / tea*

6:15-7

**Sudipta Kaviraj:** What's Western about Western Thought? (over Skype)

*dinner*

### Saturday, July 2, 2016

9:30 am

**Kavita Philip:** How to Follow Concept and Practice through Science, Technology, and Society: Methodological Notes from Undisciplined Histories of Science.

**Dhruv Raina:** On 'Conversions' and Contexts: From Biographies to the Sociology of Intellectuals

*coffee / tea*

11:30 am

**Benjamin Zachariah:** Intellectual Histories and Decentred Biographies: escaping the historiography of Gandhism through the life of Gandhi

**Hans Harder:** When Ideas Get Stuck in the Idiom, or Don't Sink Deep when Thrown into it: Problems of Intellectual History in Regional Languages of Modern South Asia

*lunch*

2 pm            Wind-up session

4 pm            End of the workshop