

**In-Between Spaces, Actors and Infrastructures:
Transimperial Approaches to Mobility
19th–20th century**

Doctoral workshop in contemporary history

University of Neuchâtel
1 October 2021

This doctoral workshop aims to bring together PhD students in contemporary history from different Swiss universities who are studying mobility in an imperial and colonial context. The workshop seeks to stimulate a methodological and theoretical dialogue between young academics doing research on different geographical areas. The workshop will open with a keynote address by **Dr. Damiano Matasci**.

In the wake of the ‘mobility turn’, historical scholarship has paid increasing attention to the circulation of goods, people and ideas in order to rethink imperialism in its multiple forms (empires, colonies, protectorates, mandates). Over the last two decades, imperial history has been profoundly renewed by the contribution of various burgeoning fields of study, such as global and transnational history, borderlands history and transimperial history, which share certain perspectives.

Firstly, a desire to decenter historical research. Transnational history emerged from a growing concern to go beyond the nation-state as the sole framework of analysis, by questioning movements, transfers and connections beyond national borders. In the wake of the ‘transnational turn’, transimperial history has questioned the relevance of studies focusing on a single empire and has instead highlighted the connections and forms of cooperation and competition between empires, as well as the dynamics that occur at the interstices of empires. It is precisely the importance of these ‘spaces in-between’ that borderlands history has stressed. By considering these spaces as zones of contact and interpenetration rather than as buffer zones or barriers, this field of study calls into question the coherence of the nation state. It also underlines the importance of cross-border movements and the agency of populations living on the periphery of empires and nation states.

Secondly, the concern to develop a methodological approach combining different scales of analysis. These fields of study seek to examine the interactions that take place at multiple levels (local, regional, national, imperial, global). By practicing this *jeu d’échelles*, historical studies point out the variety of actors and geographies, while investigating the similarities, discordances and tensions between these different levels. Multi-scalar approaches to global history, for example, could produce global historical narratives that are not totalizing. In this respect, borderlands—or spaces in-between—are privileged sites for carrying out a study of transregional or even global connections through a locality. As they are often characterised by intense mobility, these spaces on the fringes of empires can indeed constitute ‘global localities’ worthy of interest.

This workshop explores several avenues for reflection:

1. Cross-border spaces, in-between spaces. Much more than mere no man’s lands, these spaces-in-between empires and emerging nation states have a reality of their own. Local

actors and the environmental properties of these spaces often have an influence on transimperial connections and mobilities.

2. Infrastructure. The formation of transport and communication systems extending beyond national and imperial borders; the persistence of pre-colonial infrastructures; dysfunctions in colonial infrastructures and systems.
3. Transit. While the study of globalisation has sometimes tended to consider only the connections between a point of departure and a point of arrival, there is a growing literature on the state of transit ('being in transit').
4. Transimperial biographies. The circulation of individuals and objects between and beyond empires.
5. Environment. Environmental history provides a perspective for looking beyond empire and the nation-state as a framework for analysis.

Contributions should preferably focus on these research themes but may also address other topics articulating mobility and empires, in the light of the fields of study mentioned above.

Abstracts and information

An abstract in English or French (max. 300-500 words) should be sent to the following address: cesar.jaquier@unine.ch by 1 May 2021. Answers will be given by 17 May 2021 at the latest.

The workshops languages will be French and English. Communications are likely to be 15-20 minutes each.

Organiser: César Jaquier / University of Neuchâtel

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