

HIS 516 Theme Seminar Empire, Modernity

Big Transitions & Social Effects: Histories of Large-Scale Change

Wednesday 6:30-9:20pm SBS N318

Professor Eric Beverley

The world is perpetually remade by massive shifts that are global in scale and sweeping in their impacts, rippling globally over centuries or playing out in more compressed time-frames. Historical writing, however, is grounded by its tight focus on particular contexts, subjects, and practices – communities, societies, and individual people; states, institutions, texts, and documentary cultures; cities, rural areas, borderlands, and larger regions. In this experimental seminar we will think between these two contrasting scales. Some readings track epochal, revolutionary historical transformations on a global scale, typologically, or from an intellectual or conceptual perspective. Other texts are fine-grained studies of particular contexts or subjects. Many combine the two scales of analysis in varying balances. We will collectively try to think about how scholars – and we ourselves – can write histories that both reflect explicitly on large-scale global transformations, and carefully ground their analysis in particular times, places, and social worlds.

The course will move broadly chronologically, from premodern social and imperial formations, technologies, and practices; through foundational modern shifts in the industrial revolution and rise of global capitalism and modern empires; then towards the contemporary via decolonization, nation-building, neoliberal globalization, and into the contemporary rise of new idioms of majoritarian populism. Within this broad range of topics, we will consider transforming modes of production; political and economic ideologies and governance systems; energy transitions and changes in environments and infrastructures; and the way global transformations reflect and deepen global inequality, and articulate shifts in ideas and practices of race and social difference. The course is historical in orientation but interdisciplinary in conceptual and methodological scope. Readings and discussions are designed to create a framework to reflect on the implications of global shifts on connected empirical contexts across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas from premodern eras to the present (readings and topics will be set and modified depending on interests of enrolled students).

Requirements include regular attendance and active participation, in-class presentations, and two written assignments (a short review essay and a longer historiographical term paper). The term paper will be on a topic of the student's interest, determined in consultation with instructor, centered on a major historical shift or transition, and including a short experimental component based on primary sources from the student's own research. **Prerequisite:** The formal prerequisite to join the class is enrollment in a History PhD or MA program or permission of instructor, but students in other graduate degree programs for whom the subject matter and approach are relevant are encouraged to inquire with the instructor about joining the course.