

Speaker Abstracts and Bios: Minority Seminar 2019

Subaltern Fragments, Minority Optics, and 'Humanity': Theorizing the Democratic Political from Eastern India

Milinda Banerjee (LMU Munich)

How does the conceptual category of 'minority' stand in relation to more 'universalistic' categories such as 'humanity'? Are minority identities barriers to the production of capacious models of 'human' unity or class solidarity, or can they dialectically generate such models? In this paper, I attempt a response by conversing three early-mid-twentieth century Bengali perspectives with two Bengali-origin Subaltern Studies thinkers. By investigating the social and political thought of Rajavamshi 'lower caste' peasant activists, the celebrated feminist Begum Rokeya, and the militant anti-colonial poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, I show how the concept of minority ceased to be an instrument of (what Nicholas Dirks has termed as) the 'ethnographic state': the British imperial taxonomic imagination which supported the colonial state's claim to be a neutral arbiter between competing races, castes, and religions, and be the supposed protector of minorities in India. Instead, these peasant, feminist, and subaltern Muslim perspectives created enriched figurations of decolonial and democratic humanity, by dialectically working through minority optics. In the Rajavamshi peasant leader Panchanan Barma's words, this was thinking about "representation" from the perspective of the "small" and the "low". Next, I bring these colonial-era discourses into dialogue with postcolonial Subaltern Studies thought, especially of Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee. By contextualizing Subaltern Studies theory within the political churning in India in the 1960s and 70s, I show how the fragmentation of Marxist grand narratives allowed for a resurfacing and re-valorization of political imaginaries which saw communitarian/minority identities as allies, rather than antitheses, in forging solidarity between oppressed actors. In conclusion, I draw these Bengali perspectives into dialogue with European-origin theories about political agonism, especially in the tradition of Carl Schmitt, Chantal Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau. By engaging with the Bengali discourses via the mediation of G. W. F. Hegel (a significant source for Chatterjee's thinking about community, fragment, and minority), I offer a political theory of democracy which is rooted in a dialectical recuperation of the minority subaltern.

About Milinda Banerjee

Milinda Banerjee is writing his Habilitation at the Faculty of History and the Arts at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich. He defended his PhD in Heidelberg University (2014). His dissertation, which offered an intellectual history of concepts and practices of rulership and sovereignty in colonial India (with a primary focus on Bengal, ca. 1858-1947), has now been published as *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). His research project at LMU is titled 'Sovereignty versus Natural Law? The Tokyo Trial in Global Intellectual History'. Banerjee specializes in the intersections of South Asian and global intellectual history, and is the author of two other monographs on modern Bengali intellectual history, several journal

articles and book chapters, as well as the co-editor of the volume, *Transnational Histories of the 'Royal Nation'* (Palgrave, 2017), and of the forum 'Law, Empire, and Global Intellectual History', in the journal *Modern Intellectual History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Regulating Difference: Religion, Bureaucracy, and the Law

Mona Oraby (Amherst College)

While states today are inaugurating or refining complex administrative mechanisms to govern social heterogeneity, remarkably little is known about how they regulate religion, or why and how their regulatory systems endure. To answer these questions, the talk draws on primary research conducted in Egypt where debates over compulsory religious affiliation and identification have now entered their third decade. Using analysis of administrative jurisprudence on conversion, this talk illuminates the role of bureaucracies and courts in shaping interreligious relations since the twentieth century. Drawing on ethnographic insight into the lives of complainants and their legal counsel, it further theorizes the implications of state-imposed social categories for modern religious subjectivity.

About Mona Oraby

Mona Oraby is Assistant Professor of Law, Jurisprudence, and Social Thought at Amherst College. Her research sits at the intersection of law, religion, and politics with a current focus on the regulation of religious difference in contemporary Egypt. Before joining Amherst, she was the Jerome Hall Postdoctoral Fellow in the Center for Law, Society, and Culture at Indiana University Maurer School of Law. She earned her PhD in Political Science (2017) from Northwestern University, where she also completed graduate certificates in Religion & Global Politics as well as Middle East & North African Studies. Since 2017 she has served as Managing Editor of *The Immanent Frame*, a digital publication of the Social Science Research Council that features scholarly debates on religion, secularism, and the public sphere.

Colonizing Fever: Race and Visual Culture in the Nordic Region

Åsa Bharathi Larsson (Uppsala University)

The presentation focuses on visual representations of the colonial world in late nineteenth-century Sweden. Situated at the intersection between postcolonial studies, visual culture studies and cultural histories of media, the presentation has a threefold aim. Firstly, it aims to draw attention to the presence of a colonial discourse in empirical material, the majority of which has not received attention before. Secondly, it analyzes these visual representations of the colonial world, in an expanding media culture in late nineteenth century. Thirdly, it explores how a mutual vision of the European colonial project and its civilizing mission was created via visual strategies and descriptions.

About Åsa Bharathi Larsson

Åsa Bharathi Larsson holds a PhD in Art History and is a researcher and a lecturer at the Department of Art History. Her research focuses on nineteenth-century visual culture, Scandinavian colonialism, race, gender and transnational history.

'Like myself... [he] is a cripple': Disability and Identity in Victorian Britain

Daniel Blackie (University of Helsinki)

It is often assumed that disability did not emerge as a particularly meaningful category of identity until the twentieth century and the rise of the modern disability rights movement. Recent work by literary scholars focusing on middle-class British writers, however, has challenged this assumption by suggesting that recognisably 'disabled' identities similar to those apparent today also existed and held importance for people in the nineteenth century. In this talk, I explore what happens if we shift attention away from middle-class Britons towards their working-class compatriots by examining the autobiographical writings of Edward Rymer, a physically impaired Victorian mineworker. I argue that Rymer's representations of his life indicate that a 'disabled' identity was also important to him and that he asserted this identity differently (and for different purposes) depending on the circumstances in which he found himself. Highlighting this illuminates the varied meanings of disability as a category of identity in nineteenth-century Britain and suggests that it influenced the lives of Britons of all classes.

About Daniel Blackie

Daniel Blackie is a disability historian and teacher in the Area and Cultural Studies programme at the University of Helsinki. His published work includes the open access book *[Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical Impairment in British Coalmining, 1780–1880](#)* (Manchester University Press, 2018), written with David Turner, and contributions on disability in early America to the *Disability Histories* (University of Illinois Press, 2014) and *Men After War* (Routledge, 2013) collections. In his free time, Daniel likes to lay on the sofa and listen to smooth jazz.

Whitewashed history? Minorities and national gaze in Finnish historiography

Miika Tervonen (Migration Institute of Finland)

The presentation deals with the problem of national gaze in Nordic historiographies through the case of 19-20th Finnish historiography. Nation-state building has produced complex dialectical processes in which minorities become simultaneously highly politicized and visible, yet were relegated to the margins of hegemonic national narratives. A routine omitting of minorities and migrants is evident in the nation-state bound canon of historiography from 19th century onwards. Foundational writers such as Arwidsson, Yrjö-Koskinen or Schybergson routinely bypassed their considerable knowledge of the history of the Roma, for example, in constructing the Finnish national narrative. This systematic 'writing out' has been instrumental in creating a 'white-

washed' understanding of the Finnish society and its past, rendering mobility and diversity as exceptional, and by extension as problematic. While the presentation analyses facets of this white-washed history, it also points to the persistence of the national gaze, and the paradoxes and dilemmas in confronting them.

About Miika Tervonen

Miika Tervonen is a Senior Research Fellow at the Migration Institute of Finland, and a Docent (adjunct professor) on Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki. He combines historical and social science perspectives to explore the internal and external boundaries of Nordic nation/welfare states. Tervonen received his Doctorate degree at the European University Institute, Italy, studying the rise of so-called 'Gypsy questions' in 19-20th century Finland and Sweden. Tervonen has worked as a visiting scholar at the Columbia University and London School of Economics. His work on deconstructing the myth of culturally homogeneous Finland has been awarded the the Finnish State Award for Public Information and the Vuoden tiedekynä -prize.

Challenging Agency and Masculinity? Indigenous People and National Historiography

Gunlög Fur (Linnaeus University)

Indigenous peoples and minorities are, by the very definition, not numerous and often not immediately visible or noticeable in historical sources or contemporary society. In working with historical sources detailing colonial encounters I have found paying attention to margins and anomalies a useful approach. By decentering the search light different agents and processes come into focus and direct questions to the interpretive patterns of national historiographies. With reference to examples from North America and northern Scandinavia this presentation discusses questions of agency, hierarchy, and multiplicity – hopefully offering food for thought rather than definite answers.

About Gunlög Fur

Ph.D. in History (University of Oklahoma, 1993). Professor of History and Dean of Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Linnaeus University, Sweden. Research Director for Linnaeus University Centre: Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies from 2012-2016. Author of *Colonialism in the Margins. Cultural Encounters in New Sweden and Lapland* (2006), *A Nation of Women. Gender and Colonial Encounters Among the Delaware Indians* (2009), and *Painting Culture, Painting Nature. Stephen Mopope, Oscar Jacobson and the Development of Indian Art in Oklahoma* (2019). Research focuses on colonial encounters, indigenous studies, Native American, Sámi, gender, and postcolonial history. Her most recent project deals with concurrent and entangled histories of Scandinavian immigrants and Native Americans.