

## Kolloquium Abstracts

Thomas Chambers

### **'Lean on Me': *Sifarish*, Mediation & the Digitisation of State Bureaucracies in India**

#### **Abstract**

This paper traces the impacts of digitisation in Public Distribution Systems (PDS) and biometric ID provision in India. The stated aims of digitisation is the dis-embedding the state from everyday social relations and a reduction in forms of petty 'corruption', mediation, clientelism and patronage. However, the paper nuances these assumptions by focusing on everyday relations between the state, low-level Muslim *netas* (politicians) and those they represent in the Muslim *mohallas* (neighbourhoods) of a provincial North India city. The ethnography focuses on *sifarish* (obtaining a recommendation/leaning on someone) and ethnographically traces reconfigurations resulting from increasing digitisation. Utilising a combination of assemblage theory and political economy approaches, the paper illustrates how digitisation leads not to the removal of mediation, but to new ambivalences and reconfigurations. Not only does mediation not disappear but digitisation also creates possibilities for emerging forms of commodification and marketization within spaces of mediation between people and the state.

### **Between epigenetics and exposomics: examining postgenomics within “personalized” biomedicine and public health**

Nolwenn Bühler, STS Lab, University of Lausanne & MAPS, University of Neuchâtel & Luca Chiapperino, STSLab, University of Lausanne

The post-genomic turn in the life sciences has given rise to multiple experimental approaches dissecting the entanglement of our bodies and their environments. Post-genomics produces indeed a panoply of mechanisms accounting for the ways our bodies intermingle with the external world. Our gut, brains, hormones, blood, and – at a more fundamental level – our genomes all get recast, in contemporary life sciences, as fundamentally biosocial entities carrying various material traces of our ecological and social environments. This view has, as recognized by several scholars (e.g. Lock 2015, Meloni 2018), not only a transformative potential for the ways bodies are operationalized and dealt with in biomedicine, but also on the resulting strategies for governing and intervening upon life as biosocial nexus. Postgenomic knowledge may thus potentially contribute to reconfigure biomedical and public health interventions and give new shape to “personalization” efforts in the management of health risks and conditions. Drawing on our respective fieldworks – one on epigenetics and the other on exposomics – our presentation focuses on postgenomic knowledge production and on the reconfigurations of “personalization” at stake in research practices and biomedical/public health interventions in the era of “personalized health”. This umbrella term is at the core of several Swiss initiatives spurred by scientific and technical advances in the

field of (post)genomics and big data analytics. Moving beyond promissory discourses around personalized health and postgenomics, as well as their cautionary counter-narratives, our analysis sheds light on the work towards the alignment of political, ethical, technical and epistemological elements of these endeavors, as it is performed by scientific actors throughout their respective research practices.

Blind spots in global health: Lassa Fever, Science and the making of neglect in Sierra Leone.

Hannah Brown

For more than 50 years people in parts of West Africa have lived in the presence of a deadly virus that has symptoms which are similar to Ebola. You have probably never heard of Lassa Fever, even though this virus has killed many more people than Ebola and places a huge burden upon health systems in West Africa. Generations of African, North American and European scientists and health workers have tried to fight Lassa Fever, and research and responses to the disease have received substantial investment. Yet the disease remains ‘neglected’; people who live in the region continue to be at risk from Lassa Fever and unlikely to receive good care and treatment in the event of infection. This talk is based on an ongoing collaborative ethnographic book project which argues that, counterintuitively, scientific investments into Lassa Fever have helped to produce the very neglect that they aim to alleviate. I will present examples from, fieldwork on laboratory science and ecological science on Lassa fever and the implications of this work for health systems in order to explore intersections between knowledge, scientific attention, health infrastructure, and the unintended making of neglect.

*Sanderien Verstappen*

## **VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF (IN)VISIBILITY**

What can be seen and shown? By whom? Why? And what happens when these norms are breached? These questions are hard to ask because aesthetic norms so often appear self-evident, but they can be asked by anthropologists.

Visual anthropologists have long argued that the integration of visual communication practices in ethnographic research is a way of knowing about practical, performative, and sensory aspects of social life that are otherwise hard to address. Classic instances of shared anthropology and elicitation, and more recent approaches of multimodal anthropology, build on the inherently collaborative character of media production to strengthen participatory research, and to enrich dialogues with research participants. I argue that visual anthropology can also be a productive way of knowing about politics, in particular, the politics of (in)visibility. I will illustrate this approach through my own experiences as an ethnographic filmmaker in India and among overseas Indians. My films have always attempted to make the invisible visible, however, this work has confronted me with the boundaries of what *can* be made visible. I have learnt to approach filmmaking as well as film screening, therefore, as a mode of learning about the politics of display and displacement. How do some ways of being become more discernible than others?

Sabine Luning

In anthropology, geography, STS, and urban studies, scholars have started to pay attention to the underground in their analysis of political forms of domination, economic developments, the effects of technological innovations, the building of infrastructure, and the future of the world at large. The anthropology of resource extraction takes centre stage in this development, first of all in its scrutiny of the relation between the social and the subterranean. By taking gold extraction in Ghana as starting point, this lecture looks at the social - subterranean nexus. The presentation is based on collaborative work with Robert J. Pijpers. Together, we developed the concept of 'in-depth geopolitics' for analysing the dynamic, oftentimes tense, socio-spatial arrangements that emerge across different mining landscapes in Ghana (Luning and Pijpers 2017 and 2018). Our approach to 'in-depth geopolitics' foregrounds three interconnected domains: knowledge systems of the underground, technologies of extraction and their social characteristics and governance dimensions of mining practices. The lecture analyses various cases to show how the interplay of these domains affects the strategies of large-scale and different artisanal and small-scale miners for working out arrangements of cohabitation. The Ghanaian cases serve as 3-dimensional terrains for discussing how the concept of in-depth geopolitics may be relevant for the anthropological study of mining scapes in the world at large.

Sandra Calkins, Free University of Berlin

### **Banana rhythms: Landscape, loss and temporality**

What forms do banana plants create in a landscape? And whose works and movements are written into this landscape? This paper explores temporal thinking with and through landscapes cultivated by banana plants (*matooke*), a main food crop in Central Uganda. There, banana plants and their rhythms have shaped multispecies relationships for hundreds of years. The being of banana plants is becoming, growing and continually developing new fruit-bearing suckers. The banana plant is also central to imaginaries of upward mobility in this part of the world, by growing persons, communities and wealth over generations. However, temporal horizons of these plants and connected livelihoods have both accelerated and contracted with the globalization of commercial bananas as well as that of banana-specific pests and diseases, which have recently pushed the plant to the verge of extinction. Responding to concerns around the loss of a species, a number of not-yet fully realized biotech interventions propose leapfrogging the banana to the future. The paper unfurls several distinct ethical and temporal commitments (i.e linear, seasonal, generational, bunch cycle times) connected to banana cultivation and research. It broadens human conceptions of time through a lens on the landscape and its inscribed rhythms and grounds an ethic for writing about the environment in loss.

Sohini Kar

#### **Title**

Enfolding the Poor: Microfinance and the Mediation of Risk in India

#### **Abstract**

Over the past decade, commercial or for-profit microfinance has grown rapidly in India under the auspices of both the government's financial inclusion agenda, and the increasing recognition of profit at the bottom of the pyramid. Microfinance institutions raise capital through loans from commercial banks, as well as private and public equity. As the poor are enfolded into global finance through these small loans, they are also drawn into the concerns of systemic financial risk. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kolkata, India, this talk examines how financial risk comes to shape not just lending practices, but also how the poor are drawn into new circulations of capital, effectively financializing poverty. Focusing on the everyday practices of assessing creditworthiness and the collateralization of life through insurance, this talk demonstrates how urban poor borrowers are increasingly both objects of risk-taking and hedging.

## Paper, plants and people: On the social life of audits in Indian Carbon Forestry Arne Harms

Carbon forestry promises to provide solutions to mounting environmental challenges and poverty. Globally funded carbon forestry projects involve enforcing specific usage regimes in dedicated forests. What appears to be a financialization of forests operates through results-based approaches to development assistance and nature conservation cohering around the notion of services. In this view, tree growth is reframed as carbon sequestration that can be quantified and rendered a service to buyers. While human caretakers in turn are rendered eligible for remuneration for their and their forests' services raised at dedicated markets. This talk analyses the paper trail emerging from one such project in the Indian Himalayas, demonstrating how people involved at its lowest rung tactically deploy documents produced through regular audits and subject them to temporal envisioning. The quantification of trees during audits brings about, what I call, updating, lively documents mobilized in efforts to showcase commitment and to work toward anticipated futures. I demonstrate that paperwork is mobilized to back up claims to forest resources, social welfare benefits and the cultivation of political clout. Bureaucratic artefacts associated with appears to be the financialization of nature thus come to be bound up with knotted temporalities and tactical engagements. While the drive toward financializing nature comes to be incorporated into the rather ordinary political struggles to access the welfare state, to perform power and to secure forest rights.

## Sahana Udupa

Digital Dignity: Explorations of Religious Politics Online

Building on ethnographic fieldwork on online practices among prominent Hindu and Muslim political groups in India and the diaspora in the UK, we explore in this paper what it means to imagine a life of dignity – a life free from fear and shame, but more vitally filled with onward moving opportunities within inclusive political cultures. With digital dignity as the anchoring concept, we show that online practices of various sorts – archiving, webcasting, tweeting, blogging, mailing, live streaming, trolling, and tagging – have become central to tensions and aspirations surrounding religion, which limit and enable a politics of belonging. We draw upon anthropological scholarship on digital media and

philosophical debates on dignity to examine the unique mediations that have come to define political conditions for religious groups within nation state structures at a time when nations extend their influence beyond their territorial boundaries through digital means of connections and reciprocations.

Ruth Prince

Refiguring the Social?" Kenya's experiments with Universal Health Coverage

Across the globe, current experiments with Universal Health Coverage appear to extend “the social”. Reviving a language of fairness and social justice, solidarity and human rights, and recognizing the responsibility of the state for the health of its citizens, Universal Health Coverage takes up earlier aspirations of ‘health for all’. In Kenya, the government has enthusiastically embraced UHC. On 13th December 2018, Kenya’s president Uhuru Kenyatta launched a “UHC pilot” scheme, dubbed “*Afya Care – Wema Wa Mkenya*” (Health Care – Good for Kenyans) to take place in four of the 47 counties involving a total of 3.4 million residents. Supported by the World Bank and Kenya’s Ministry of Finance, the “lessons learned” from this experience are to feed into the expansion of UHC to the whole country by 2022. Digital technology companies alongside NGOs and donors are heavily involved in the state-orchestrated UHC programme as it experiments with “innovative” digital technology to increase healthcare access. In this paper I explore how the various actors involved, in both the public and private sectors, approach UHC as a social or public good and explore the implications for the ways in which relationships between healthcare, markets and states are being re-imagined and enacted in and beyond east Africa.

## **Research as Development: Biomedical Research, Ethics, and Collaboration in Sri Lanka**

**Salla Sariola University of Helsinki**

In *Research as Development*, Salla Sariola and Bob Simpson show how international collaboration operates in a setting that is typically portrayed as "resource-poor" and "scientifically lagging." Based on their long-term fieldwork in Sri Lanka, Sariola and Simpson bring into clear ethnographic focus the ways international scientific collaborations feature prominently in the pursuit of global health in which research operates "as" development and not merely "for" it.

The authors follow the design, inception, and practice of two clinical trials: one a global health charity funded trial and the other a pharmaceutical industry-sponsored trial. *Research as Development* situates these two trials within their historical, political and cultural contexts and thus counters the idea that local actors are merely passive recipients of new technical and scientific rationalities.

While social studies of clinical trials are beginning to be an established niche in academic writing, *Research as Development* highlights the critical and creative role that local researchers play in establishing international collaborations and making them work into locally viable forms. The volume shows how these clinical and research interactions bring about changes in culture, technologies and expertise in Sri Lanka, in contexts that have not previously been written about in detail.

Salla Sariola is a Finnish Academy Research Fellow at University of Helsinki where she runs the Social Study of Microbes Research Group in Sociology. Her background is in Science and Technology Studies and Medical Anthropology.

Risa Cromer

TITLE: Ex Utero: Frozen Embryo Politics in the United States

ABSTRACT: Over a million human embryos left over from in vitro fertilization procedures have accumulated in fertility clinic freezers across the United States. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the fates of these reproductive remainders became the subject of public debate. In 1998, biologists in a University of Wisconsin lab established the first human embryonic stem cell line from a donated leftover embryo. That same year, the first child was born through the world's first "embryo adoption" program—a Christian effort to rescue embryos from "frozen orphanages" by facilitating their chances to be born. These coinciding events raised social, political, ethical, and practical questions about what should happen with the accumulating embryos widely deemed as unwanted but un-wastable. Based on twenty-seven months of ethnographic research within programs that make and manage frozen embryos, this talk offers an inside look at American answers to where frozen embryos belong. The figure of the *ex utero* embryo provides a novel focal point for revealing how racial capitalism, private property regimes, and white settler Christianity co-operate within twenty-first century reproductive politics in the United States.