



Zurich Human Geography Colloquium Program Spring Semester 2024

Dr Tatiana Thieme, Associate Professor in Human Geography, University College London (UCL), UK

Thinking with Nairobi hustles to study the future of work in post-wage, post-pandemic economies

Public lecture: Tue, 5 March, 4-5pm, Room Y25-H-38

Workshop: Wed, 6 March, 9-12pm, Room Y25-H-L40

(For details and to register for the workshop, please write to khaoula.ettarfi@geo.uzh.ch by 4 March 2024)

Prof Leigh Johnson, Associate Professor, Depts of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Oregon, US

Digging in the drylands: Valuing labor and landform in nature-based solutions

Public lecture: Tue, 19 March, 4-5pm, Room Y25-H-38

Prof Debjani Bhattacharyya, Professor for the History of the Anthropocene, University of Zurich, Switzerland

Muddy Waters: Conjuring Land in Indian Rivers

Public lecture: Tue, 9 April, 4-5pm, Room Y25-H-38

Dr Jayaseelan Raj, Associate Professor of Anthropology and International Development, King's College London, UK

Counter-Plantation Imaginaries

Deproletarianisation as Autonomy in India's Tea Belts

Public lecture: Tue, 14 May, 4-5pm, Room Y25-H-38

Workshop: Tue, 14 May, 9:30-12pm, Room Y25-L-40

(For details and to register for the workshop, please write to chitrangada.choudhury@geo.uzh.ch by 7 May)



Tue, 5 March 2024 | Dr Tatiana Thieme

Thinking with *Nairobi* hustles to study the future of work in post-wage, post-pandemic economies

‘Hustling’ has a loaded connotation and is in many ways opaque as a concept and a practice. It has been historically stigmatised for its ambiguous moral economy, and at the same time today it has become integral to popular vernacular across different cities around the world, with equivalent concepts in other languages (e.g. la brega, la débrouille...). Interested in the convergence of ethnography and action research, Tatiana has been documenting the skills, labour and creativity of the hustle economy, and argues for a (re)theorisation of hustle geographies that connects to, but also differs from familiar cognate concepts such as informality, precarity, gig, and entrepreneurship. Researching hustle economies across cities in both the global North and South, Tatiana has engaged with youth in Nairobi’s peripheral neighbourhoods since 2009, with refugees in Paris and Berlin since 2017, and with prison-leavers in London since 2016. She is currently working on a book titled *Nairobi Hustles* (to be published in spring of 2025 with Minnesota University Press), drawing on over a decade of work with Nairobi youth groups in popular neighbourhoods who narrate everyday life, work, and belonging as “hustle/hustling”. The book argues that hustle can be read as a livelihood strategy in contexts of consistent uncertainty, but also as a cultural and political urban practice that shapes counter-hegemonic forms of everyday resistance and performance, with historical ties to Afro-diasporic struggles and solidarities in the face of racial capitalism.

Tatiana has worked on different research projects over the last decade focused on better understanding how people (especially youth) in precarious urban environments “make work” outside the waged economy. This lecture will reflect on the social history of “hustling” and reflect on how and why it has become such a prominent narration in Kenya today. Tatiana argues that thinking with Nairobi offers timely lessons for studying contemporary manifestations of changing cultures of work in other geographies, in the post-pandemic, post-wage world..



Tue, 19 March 2024 | Prof Leigh Johnson

Digging in the drylands: Valuing labor and landform in nature-based solutions

Across drylands of Africa, an unassuming landform has multiplied by the hundreds of thousands in recent years. Known as soil “bunds” or “half-moons”, these small earthen semi-circles are dug in order to capture and redistribute runoff during the rainy season, breaking up hardened bare soil crusts and regenerating rangeland grasses. Non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies celebrate bunds as paradigmatic “nature-based solutions”, touting them as low-tech, low-cost, scalable interventions for ecological restoration and climate adaptation in African dry-lands. Yet financing and implementing bunds at a large scale is far from straightforward. They are remarkably expensive, and their construction requires huge amounts of carefully coordinated human labor in remote geographies – even more difficult given the recent devastating drought in the Horn of Africa. This talk explores how and why bund-digging projects have nonetheless proliferated. Drawing examples from Kenyan range-lands, I show how bunds have come to bear and circulate diverse forms of value – ecological, social, economic, and financial – highlighting the centrality of low- or no-cost labor to realizing this value. This case suggests neglected questions for other nature-based solutions: How are standardized wage rates constructed? What is the value of volunteered versus paid work? How are remunerative adaptation jobs distributed? And what is the construction of an adaptive landform “worth”, and to whom?

Leigh Johnson is an economic geographer and political ecologist whose work examines the economic distribution of climate and disaster risks, and the labor regimes through which climate adaptation is performed. Previously a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in the Economic Geography Group at GIUZ, she is happy to return to as a Verena Meyer Guest Professor for Spring 2024



Tue, 9 April 2024 | Prof Dejeni Bhattacharyya

Muddy Waters: Conjuring Land in Indian Rivers

In 1780, a landowner in the littorals on the eastern Indian Ocean petitioned the East India Company, the newly minted revenue farmer in Calcutta, that he was unable to pay revenue for six months since he owned a vast body of water (which was land only intermittently). Soon thereafter a land surveyor abandoned his survey upon discovering sheets of water in the mangrove forests of the Sundarban, for such work went beyond the spirit of the order of his land survey. As bureaucratic procedures and legality were repeatedly dissolved by the bogs of the Bengal delta, the lawmakers of the East India Company resorted to unique forms of legal arguments through the nineteenth century. Indeed, they began to draw and sketch the many ways a river moves. These sketches, substantially different from contemporary cartographic practices, instantiated the multiple ways one can own fictitious land and muddy waters. These anticipatory, phantasmatical sketches created a property-imaginary that conjured land in swamps, ponds, streams, spill-channels and tidal flats. This talk will explore the attempts at producing empirical generality in amphibious terrain through these two questions: First, how did the moving alluvium of the turbid Ganga-Brahmaputra delta-system intersect with colonial legal practices through the nineteenth century? Second, by focusing on the interpreters of these images, I want to probe the epistemic value created by these drawings of imagined landscapes in sheets of water.

Dejeni Bhattacharyya holds the Chair for the History of the Anthropocene at the University of Zurich, where she directs the Digital History Lab. She is the author of *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). She is a non-resident fellow at the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania since 2019. Currently she is writing a long history of how marine insurance market's risk apprehensions shaped weather knowledge and a derivatives market in climate futures in the Indian Ocean Region.



Tue, 14 May 2024 | **Dr Jayaseelan Raj**

Counter-Plantation Imaginaries

De proletarianisation as Autonomy in India's Tea Belts

In September 2015, a massive strike was organised by the women tea pluckers in the Munnar tea belt of the south Indian state of Kerala. Pembillai Orumai, as they came to be known, made history by forcing the tea company to increase the daily wage and bonus. They not only organised outside the unions but also against them for their corrupt alliance with the company. The strike was a major milestone in the history of labour resistance in the global south. However, the uprising that turned into an alternative labour movement that started with 8,000 Dalit women workers collapsed, and the membership was reduced to five within a period of one year. This talk revisits this extraordinary uprising, the larger transformation it generated, and the contexts in which it collapsed within a span of a year. I argue that the long-term sustaining of the workers' uprising / movement depends on counter-plantation imaginaries that challenge expropriation and strengthen their autonomy through resource mobilisation outside the plantation system.

Jayaseelan Raj is a Senior Lecturer of Anthropology and Development at King's College London and a Fellow in the GRNPP at SOAS, University of London. He is the author of *Plantation Crisis: Ruptures of Dalit Life in the Indian Tea Belt* (UCL Press, 2022) and co-author of *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-First Century India* (Pluto Press, 2017). His research and writings focus on plantation system and labour, caste, class, gender and ethnicity, agrarian capitalism and migration, and state and Dalit question in India.