The Columbia Center for International History presents

**Late Imperial Epistemologies: A Eurasian Studies Workshop**
May 17-18, 2013
1219 International Affairs Building

Co-sponsored by the Harriman Institute, the Blinken European Institute, the Middle East Institute, the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, and the University Seminars

Friday, May 17, 2013

**9:45-12:15: Building Archives and Writing History in an Age of Empire**

Markus Friedrich, “Early Modern Empires and Early Modern Archives”

Tong Lam, “The Empire of Facts: From Divide and Rule to Combine and Count in Late Qing China”

Marwa Elshakry, “From Islamic to Western Science: The Making of a Golden Age Narrative in the Age of Empire”

Chair: Larry Wolff (NYU)

**2:00-5:00 Diagnosing Imperial Decline: Sciences of Health, Race, and Society**

Cemil Aydin, “The Question of ‘Ottoman Decline’ in the Political Theology of Late Imperial Muslim Modernism(s)”

Marina Mogilner, “The Empire of Knowledge about the ‘Empire in Decline’: The ‘Imperial’ Language of Racial Redescription of the Russian Empire

Emese Lafferton, “Multi-Ethnicity, Race and Imperial Decline in East-Central Europe: Hungarian Eugenics and Turanism in the First Decades of the Twentieth Century”

Anna Afanasyeva, “Imperial Doctors, the State, and the Politics of Knowledge in the Late Russian Empire”

Chair: Alexander Cooley (Columbia)
Saturday, May 18, 2013

9:45-12:15 Political Experimentation and Discipline Formation

Peter Perdue, “New Knowledges in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century China: Space, Borders, and Resources”

Natasha Wheatley, “Constitutions, Quasi-Sovereignties, and International Law: Late-Imperial Legal Epistemologies in Austria-Hungary”

Steven Seegel, “Modern Ostmitteleuropa Geographers between Western Science and Ethnonational Fantasy: Carto-Psychology and Spatial Epistemes from the Late Habsburg Empire to Early Interwar Poland and Hungary”

Chair: Tarik Amar (Columbia)

2:00-4:15 Modernization, Preservation, and Environmental Legacies of Decline

Alan Mikhail, “Animals and the Ottoman Empire”

Pey-Yi Chu, “The Trans-Siberian Railway and the Reification of Frozen Earth, 1880s-1920s”

Ruth Rogaski, “Science and Imperial Myth: The 1910 Qing Expedition to Changbaishan”

Chair: Richard Bulliet (Columbia)

4:30-5:30 Closing discussion led by Eugenia Lean and Christine Philliou (Columbia)

Abstracts:

Markus Friedrich (Goethe University, Frankfurt)

Early Modern Empires and Early Modern Archives

The paper will first try to provide a few ideas about how historians should go about studying the history of archives. These conceptual remarks will then be applied to the question if (and if so, how) archives and practices of archiving contributed to the formation, governance, and control of early modern empires. Notions about knowledge, power, and control will have to be reassessed in order to discuss the relationship between record-keeping and empire-building. It is contended that the relevance of knowledge (and, hence, of archives) might be more complex than is at times assumed.
**Tong Lam** (University of Toronto)

The Empire of Facts: From Divide and Rule to Combine and Count in Late Qing China

The transformation from a dynastic empire to an imperial nation was the cover story of the drastic political, institutional, and intellectual transformations that took place in the final decade of the Qing empire (1644-1912). As the new body politic regarded the people, as opposed to divinity, as the new basis of political legitimacy, it also required a different kind of information about the geobody. This paper examines the changing technologies of government in the rapidly shifting geopolitical context of the later Qing period, and analyzes how the fact emerged as the primary epistemological unit of knowledge production and circulation. The new technologies of government in question includes, but are not limited to, census, maps, illustrations of ethnic minorities, as well as news reportages. Finally, this paper further considers how older visual and textual strategies associated with the imperial era were appropriated and refashioned in the new context for constructing scientific authority and producing exact knowledge of the imperial nation.

**Marwa Elshakry** (Columbia University)

From Islamic to Western Science: The Making of a Golden Age Narrative in the Age of Empire

This paper will survey the rise of a historical discourse on the Golden Age of Arab-Islamic Science through Arabic and European and American Orientalist writings from the early nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

**Cemil Aydin** (University of North Carolina)

The Question of "Ottoman Decline" in the Political Theology of Late Imperial Muslim Modernism(s)

Why was it that the discourses on the Ottoman imperial decline became intertwined with a long lasting narrative of “Muslim decline” in the late 19th and 20th centuries? The Ottoman Empire included between 10-20 percent of world’s Muslim populations during the 19th century. More importantly, it had significant ratio of non-Muslim populations. Yet, even today, modern transnational Muslim intellectual trends associate the question of Muslim decline and humiliation with narratives of Ottoman imperial failure and the disintegration of the empire. Which intellectual circuits and political agendas made the question of the Ottoman empire’s relative military and fiscal weakness in relation to other empires an issue of Muslim civilization’s incompatibility with modern science, social progress and modernity? When and why? How did the Ottoman imperial elites themselves approach the question of the empire, Islam and progress? Which themes and arguments on the Ottoman imperial decline became dominant in the post-imperial historical consciousness?

In this paper, I will discuss the approaches of four different yet interrelated intellectual circles to the double question of Ottoman and Muslim decline. European Orientalists, Istanbul based Young Ottoman and Young Turks reformists, Cairo based Al-Manar group, and South Asian Muslim intellectuals. All four
intellectual networks, which were linked through global circuits of intellectual exchange and polemics, reflected on the destiny of the Ottoman empire in relation to its rivals, especially the British and Russian empires. More importantly, they made the question of Ottoman reform and renewal an issue of political theology as well as an epistemological question of civilizational encounter. Analyzing the similarities and differences among the positions of four different networks on Ottoman and Muslim decline will not only help us clarify a pattern of trans-imperial intellectual exchange, but also help us uncover the roots of contemporary themes of transnational Muslim thought.

Marina Mogilner (University of Kazan)

The Empire of Knowledge about the “Empire in Decline”: The “Imperial” Language of Racial Redescription of the Russian Empire

In this paper, I draw attention to a paradoxical situation: empire became “visible” to modern social sciences as a distinctive phenomenon and a research problem only at the very end of the “age of empires,” and only as a historically doomed type of society. The very perception of “imperial decline” was formed by the advance of the nation-centered perspective as a normative framework of modern knowledge in the course of the nineteenth century. Attempts to objectify cultural and social distances between metropoles and colonies, to conceptualize the “indigenous knowledge” as an alternative to the imperial discursive authority, to juxtapose the national citizenship of the population of imperial metropoles to the special statuses of the inhabitants of colonial peripheries, and other attempts to rationalize internal borders and hierarchies in empires were made in the name of the new understanding of groupness, modernity, and progress. The self-conscious nation-centered mode of social thinking that informed this understanding of modern groupness as internally homogeneous social and cultural blocs with hardly penetrable borders differed from the mostly spontaneous imperial orientation toward irregular diversity as a norm (when taxonomies and hierarchies built on alternative principles of classification coexisted). Therefore, it would be more accurate to speak not about objective symptoms of imperial decline (which, in any case, can be diagnosed only retrospectively), but about the emergence of the paradigm of “imperial decline,” which made empire visible and turned it into an object of scholarly reflection, social engineering, and political revolution. This a priori dismissive paradigm of the nation-centered worldview raises the question of whether modern empires were capable of generating alternative languages of self-description (possibly carrying a different diagnosis of imperial societies) that would be compatible with nationalizing social sciences and recognized as part of the modern episteme.

I base my discussion of this question on the case of Russian race science of the late nineteenth–early twentieth century. The predicament of “imperial decline” was conceptualized there as a dichotomy of modern/archaic, and the solution to the problems of the day was seen in scientific cognition and rationalization of the composite society, but not necessarily in its disintegration into distinctive “national” compounds. While trying to turn their “archaic” empire into a modern “empire of knowledge” and a modern state, and thus prevent its “decline,” Russian social scientists used the language of race to rationalize and systematize multidimensional imperial diversity. They refused to
affiliate themselves with the archaic and illiberal dynastic imperial state, but also censored nationalizing trends in race science as scientifically erroneous and potentially contributing to “imperial decline.” They ended up, however, not with the Modiglianesque (or Gellnerian) pattern of hierarchically objectified blocs-races, but with the reproduction of the same irregular imperial differences and heterogeneity on new epistemological grounds. I analyze the application of modern knowledge to the Russian imperial context by these radical modernists in science who openly articulated their preference for the imperial social organization over the national, and to evaluate their reconceptualization of the Russian empire in racial terms as an original language of imperial self-description (based on the principles of imperial heterogeneity and racial interconnectedness), beyond the paradigm of “decline.”

Emese Lafferton (University of Edinburgh)

Multi-Ethnicity, Race and Imperial Decline in East-Central Europe: Hungarian Eugenics and Turanism in the First Decades of the Twentieth Century

My contribution to the workshop forms part of my larger project on the history of racial sciences in the Hungarian Kingdom in the decades around 1900. That studies various scientific disciplines which engendered different understandings of race in this ethnically most diverse country of Europe. Based on my former research on ethnography and anthropology, I have already claimed that, unlike Western European and German histories of these disciplines, the Hungarian case demonstrated that a dominantly pluralistic and integrative attitude towards the nation’s ethnic communities prevailed in these disciplines in the decades around 1900, and no remarkable shift towards a biological, hierarchical and racialist thinking took place before 1914. I explained this with the multi-ethnic character of the Kingdom and the strong state policy of cultural and social assimilation of national minority groups. I argued that, as a form of “internal colonization,” assimilation necessitated integrative, rather than stigmatising or exclusionary strategies. While this did not rule out the clearly nationalistic or chauvinistic attempts to strengthen Magyar dominance in the cultural and economic spheres, an understanding of the Hungarian nation as an integrative unit seems to have excluded the scientific biologisation of racial or ethnic differences and also prevented the spread of racist argumentation based on hierarchy and exclusion. Assimilation ran counter to the precepts of the myth of racial purity, which myth in turn saw assimilation as a source of racial degeneration and thus a menace to the nation. This dominant refusal of the biological racial explanation and, with this, what could be seen at the time as innovative, progressive trends which increasingly characterised Western ethnography and anthropology, Hungarian scientists chose alternative interpretative frameworks and explanations that they believed could stop imperial decline and keep the already shattering structure of the multi-ethnic Kingdom together.

My paper for this workshop focuses on two early-20th century scientific and social movements which involved scientists from various fields (such as eugenics, psychiatry, geography, anthropology, ethnography) and which may serve as test-cases to my overall thesis proposed above. First I discuss aspects of the history of Hungarian eugenics in a comparative European framework that shed light on what specific national version of eugenics evolved in Hungary and why. I am interested in: whether the movement was “strong” with considerable social support or not; what role the state had in the
movement; what type of eugenic measures (negative or positive) were proposed and how much of it did actually get implemented; which scientific disciplines contributed to eugenic discourses and what kind of racial concepts they imported or reinvented; what did “race” mean for key eugenicists; what programs/agendas Hungarian eugenicists came up with and how did they problematize multi-ethnicity or the “multi-racial” setup of the Kingdom.

In the second part of my talk, I focus on the Hungarian movement of Turanism as a novel way of conceptualising the Magyars’ place in Europe and beyond. Seen as a virtually “orphan” people in Europe (that lacked ethnic kinship with any of the surrounding peoples), the Magyars had been linked, in conflicting 19th century scientific theories, to both the Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples. Linguists, ethnographers and anthropologists waged wars over the origins of the Magyars. The new movement of Turanism that gained momentum from the 1900s offered a way to integrate these conflicting theories and resituate the Magyars on the ethnic map of the world (and, with it, the cultural and political position of the Hungarian Kingdom). By integrating the Magyars in the Eastern pan-turkic network, Turanism was also seen as offering some sort of protection against the growing European pan-germanic and pan-slavic movements that were seen as threatening magyar dominance within the polity as well as the integrity of the multi-ethnic Hungarian Kingdom. Proponents of Turanism were naturally aware of Western patterns of colonisation when they gave rise to the idea of a specifically Hungarian imperialism. Yet considering their endeavours to strengthen the cultural, economic and political influence of the Hungarian Kingdom on the Balkans and in territories further to the east, it is evident that Turanism in essence meant a turn away from the West and seeking a solution for preserving the Kingdom in the East. Furthermore, concerning the overall thesis described at the beginning, the history of Turanism suggests that, before WWI, the movement built on a dominantly cultural notion of racial/ethnic linkage between peoples which gave way to a racialist and hierarchical thinking only after the end of the war which also brought an end to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Hungarian Kingdom.

Anna Afanasyeva (Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University)

Imperial Doctors, the State, and the Politics of Knowledge in the Late Russian Empire

The late imperial period witnessed the growing critique of the state by the educated Russian society that was calling for the “renovation” and social change. The voices of doctors were particularly influential in this criticism as the situation of national decline was increasingly articulated in biomedical terms (D. Beer). While the expanding activity of doctors in the public sphere and their complex relationship with the state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been explored by a number of scholars (N. Frieden, S. G. Solomon, L. Engelstein, D. Beer), the question of doctors’ engagement with imperial structures on the borders of the empire remains virtually uncharted.

The paper seeks to address the character of the relationship of the Russian doctors working in one of the imperial borderlands, the Kazakh steppe, with the state in the early twentieth century: to analyse the ways the medical professionals conceptualized their own role within the Russian imperial project and the place of medicine in imperial reform. It will also discuss the degree to which the doctors’
responses to the perceived imperial crisis were shaped by their often radical background, as many medical professionals working in the region were initially sent there as political exiles; the paper will look at the effects this situation had on the knowledge produced by the doctors about the steppe and its people.

**Peter C. Perdue** (Yale University)

**New Knowledges in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century China: Space, Borders, and Resources**

In the late Qing dynasty, after the Opium wars of the 1840s and 1860, a group of scholars and officials began to redefine the spatial dimensions of the empire, through new interpretations of geography and the historical formation of borders. In order to resist the onslaught of the Western and Japanese imperialists, they promoted the “self-strengthening movement”, focused on building the Qing’s military and economic forces through rapid industrialization. Although for some time scholars have viewed the self-strengthening movement as a failure, because of China’s loss to Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, now they have begun to revise their valuation of it, in light of China’s notable successes in state building in the late twentieth century. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the “New Policies” of the Qing promoted further active strengthening of the state through expansive projects of territorial control and economic growth. Although the self-strengthening and New Policy movements had only limited military and economic achievements, they began the path to the creation of new knowledge about China’s borders and about the possibility of developing the resources of the empire to resist the modern West.

The rise of historical geography, geology, ethnography, and cartography from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century reflected the ability of the empire and its successor, the Republic of China, to adapt Western disciplines that served imperialism for the use of a rising imperial and nation state. Unlike the colonized regions of the world, China occupied the dual position of being both an empire in its own right and a victim of imperial pressures to yield territory and resources. As these new scientific and technological disciplines focused on the exploration of resources, like coal, forests, and minerals, in China’s periphery, they both mimicked Western imperial projects and resisted them. I will examine certain writings by travelers, officials, merchant investors, and scientists of this period in order to analyze the new forms of knowledge-making that came out of this first effort to turn Western knowledge into a tool of imperial reformation and state building.

**Natasha Wheatley** (Columbia University)

**Constitutions, Quasi-Sovereignties, and International Law: Late-Imperial Legal Epistemologies in Austria-Hungary**

This paper analyzes the legal logics that underwrote Austro-Hungarian constitutional history in the half-century before the empire’s collapse. In tracing the shifting legal organization of sub-imperial polities, I contextualize the late Danube Monarchy within the new literature on imperial law, sovereignty, and
international order – a literature that has almost entirely neglected the Habsburg case. This framing allows us to investigate the Habsburg constitutional experiments of the late nineteenth century alongside other coterminous imperial attempts to manage the ambiguities of sub-imperial jurisdictions (like the British jurisprudence on the quasi-sovereignty of the Princely States in India, for example). Different constitutional proposals mooted different ways of codifying the rights and jurisdictional prerogatives of the empire’s sub-polities—most centrally Hungary, but also Croatia and the Bohemian Lands—resulting in complex overlapping or “pooled” sovereignties. In this way, constitutional jurisprudence formed an explicit genre of knowledge about the empire, mapping its legal geography and organizing different orders of rights as it attempted to arrest the empire’s component parts in abstract legal form. Often driven by the imperatives of imperial salvage, this constitutional practice brokered creative, even avant-garde legal solutions to the empire’s centrifugal forces, for example by combining older understandings of historic state rights with the linguistic and social claims of a newer ethnic nationalism as dual and simultaneous principles structuring imperial governance.

My paper thus examines the legal epistemologies implicitly referenced in the conventional description of this era as one of constitutional experiments. What were the rules and conceivable outcomes of these experiments? In what world of possibilities did they take place? I will pay particular attention to the structural tension between legal experimentation and the logics of the law’s ostensible continuity, an area in which the friction between tradition and innovation required close intellectual management. In doing so, I take up Reinhart Koselleck’s observation that legal history unfolds in a different “time,” with different structures of duration, to history more generally conceived. Attention will also be paid to legal reasoning by international analogy (as in Hungary’s claims about the similarity of the Hungarian and British constitutions), as well as the various absent-present laws that populated the landscape within which these experiments took place (including ancient, unwritten, and draft laws, respectively). In all this, the shifting imperial constitution represents an archive of conceptions of state legitimacy, a repository of residual and conflicting legalities stacked uncomfortably together as the empire went about articulating and re-articulating the logics of its order.

Steven Seegel (University of Northern Colorado)

Modern Ostmitteleuropa Geographers between Western Science and Ethnonational Fantasy: Carto-Psychology and Spatial Epistemes from the Late Habsburg Empire to Early Interwar Poland and Hungary

The paper looks at how the trajectories of two influential modern European geographers’ affinities by class, nationality, confession, profession, and region – Eugeniusz Romer of Poland and Count Pál Teleki of Hungary – showed the carto-psychological persistence of a tenuous foundationalism of place as a component of 19th-century colonial geographers’ epistemes of natural conquest, scientific progress, open frontiers, and binaristic gendered norms of private and public space. Based on their works and unpublished correspondence in Kraków and Budapest, it applies post-structuralist work in critical geography and cartography studies to emergent transnational histories of intellectual borrowing, and to the history of the professionalization of modern European geographers as scientific experts.
The central argument is that these “antimodern modern” geographers were part of an illiberal generation that held fast not only to *Wissenschaft* in the classic sense but also to a quasi-religious historiosophy and geosophy in their political rivalries, and in the texts and subtexts of the totalizing national maps of geo-bodies they created, disseminated, and used. The efforts of Romer and Teleki to professionalize geography and cartography from the 1890s to the 1930s were not only national-institutional but also *biographical* in a deeper sense and therefore part of personal and regional—in this case, Galician and Transylvanian—spatial fantasies. Their mental maps must be studied not simply in the heroic ethnonational frames of Polish or Hungarian martyrology, or struggles for justice on the part of 19th-century and interwar territorial revisionists; rather, these well-traveled multilingual European geographers sought “scientific” international solutions to tensions between epistemic foundationalism and relativism, and the constructions of “manly” selfhood and civilization which were presupposed by their gendered norms. By showing how their geographic and cartographic practices were transmitted from Europe’s colonial and dynastic empires into the epistemic frameworks of interwar nation-states, the paper finally adds to the growing body of literature among historians dealing with the reified divides of declinist or reformist empires versus regenerated or developing nation-states, and “Western” against “indigenous” scientific expertise and knowledge.

Alan Mikhail (Yale University)

Animals and the Ottoman Empire

In the land-based agrarian world of early modern Ottoman Egypt, animal wealth, labor, and movement were the bases of social and economic life. Animals were the trucks, motors, cranes, heaters, and gas stations of this early modern society. Interspecies relations between humans and various classes of animals were, however, radically altered at the end of the eighteenth century by a combination of climatic, epidemiological, political, and economic processes associated with the onset of the Anthropocene. The new human-animal world that resulted was one in which livestock were no longer a central pillar of economic, social, and political life in Ottoman Egypt. This diminished role of animals led, in turn, to a radical restructuring of the rural world as it transitioned away from animal labor, energy, and motor power. Thus, as Egypt moved from being the most lucrative province of the Ottoman Empire to a nineteenth-century centralizing state, human-animal relations changed more fundamentally between 1770 and 1830 than they had for millennia before that. This paper traces this change at the turn of the nineteenth century to understand the political, social, ecological, and economic history of the Ottoman Empire through one of the most basic of all human relationships—those with other animals.

Pey-Yi Chu (Pomona College)

The Trans-Siberian Railway and the Reification of Frozen Earth, 1880s-1920s

At the turn of the twentieth century, the tsarist regime of Russia attempted an ambitious modernizing project in its eastern domains. Imperial officials hoped that the Trans-Siberian railway would integrate distant territories into the empire and bolster Russia’s status as a great power. Although their grand
visions of economic transformation remained unrealized when war and revolution ended the Romanov dynasty, the project nevertheless mobilized the study and transformation of the landscape of eastern Siberia. How did railway construction in eastern Siberia shape investigations of the land? How did ideas about the land generated in the late imperial era circulate into the Soviet period? What changes did they undergo in the process?

In this essay, I examine investigations into frozen earth carried out by imperial scientists and engineers in connection with the surveying and construction of the Trans-Siberian railway. Although frozen earth had previously presented a geophysical puzzle that intrigued naturalists such as Karl Ernst von Baer, the railway project focused attention on its status as an engineering obstacle. Figures such as geophysicist Vladimir Shostakovich, geologist Aleksandr L'vov, geographer Innokentii Lopatin and engineer Leonard Iachevskii approached frozen earth as a local problem but also speculated about its connections to broader phenomena such as climate. The tension between a broader scientific and a more specific engineering approach marked understandings of frozen earth into the Soviet period. By examining the history of frozen earth together with the Trans-Siberian railway, I aim to connect the evolution of a scientific object to local environments and economic practices.

Ruth Rogaski (Vanderbilt University)

Science and Imperial Myth: The 1910 Qing Expedition to Changbaishan

In the last year of the waning empire, with a child—emperor on the throne and republican revolution in the air, the Qing government sponsored a scientific expedition to explore Changbaishan, the mythical mountain homeland of the Aisin Gioro imperial line. Since the seventeenth century, the Qing court had lauded the beauty of this towering semi-dormant volcano and its caldera lake through poetry and legend. At the same time, the Qing court explored and extensively mapped the mountain as a borderland crucial to the security of the empire. What made the 1910 expedition different from its predecessors?

This paper explores the goals and results of the 1910 expedition, with a focus on the ways the participants attempted to wield science as a symbol of imperial vigor. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw both the Romanov and Japanese empires encroaching on the northeastern borders of the Qing – encroachment symbolically expressed through military-scientific expeditions to the summit of Changbai. In 1910, the Qing attempted to up the ante by becoming the first expedition to bring photographic equipment to the summit and use it to capture the “true spirit” of the mountain on film. The photographs and texts generated by the expedition demonstrate the use of science not to generate universally applicable data, but to bolster imperial myth.