The Temporalities of Capitalism: Time, Timing and the Formation of the World Economy

Organisers: Christof Dejung (Bern), Moritz von Brescius (Harvard and Bern)
23 to 25 June 2022, Hotel Bad Murtensee

The history of capitalism has attracted ever growing interest among scholars in the last decade. Several studies aimed for exploring the role of violence and imperialism for the implementation of capitalist economies across the world and studied the relation between state policy and economic actors. Others have expounded on the role of consumption for the establishment of industrial production, the increased commodification of everyday life, or the social embeddedness of economic interaction. Due to the role of entrepreneurial competition and the reliance on credit, capitalism is characterized by a high degree of volatility. Time management and the evaluation of future developments are thus crucial for economic actors.

Yet, even though pioneering studies such as those of E. P. Thompson (1967) or Jacques Le Goff (1960) pointed out the role of temporal regimes in the implementation of capitalism, only few studies have picked out this topic as a central theme so far (Sewell 2008; Beckert 2016; Ogle 2019). This conference aims for breaking new ground by exploring the significance of temporal regimes for the breakthrough of capitalism globally. It will address the following themes in particular:

1) The contributions will explore whether capitalist economies are structured by a particular manner of time management and calculating the future and examine when, and why, such techniques were implemented.

2) Papers will examine the extent to which capitalist economies were confronted with the ‘non-simultaneity of the simultaneous’ across the world. Were there frictions between linear capitalist time orders and other temporalities (such as natural cycles) and how did actors cope with, or capitalize on, respectively, such challenges?

3) How can the temporalities of capitalism be linked to recent debates about the Anthropocene? Could it be that the economic capacity of capitalism, rendered possible, among other things, by an efficient time management, destroyed the very ecological basis on which it relied in the first place?

By linking the history of temporality, which has become a vibrant research field in the last few years, to the history of capitalism, the workshop aims for confirming that economic history in general, and the history of capitalism in particular, cannot be understood without investigating the cultural processes that accompanied, and often rendered possible, the implementation of specific economic structures.

The conference is funded by the Historical Institute and the Center for Global Studies of the University of Bern.
PROGRAMME

THURSDAY, 23 JUNE

13:00 Reception

13:30 Introduction: Christof Dejung (Bern) and Moritz von Brescius (Harvard and Bern)

14:00 Panel 1: Investors and Economic Expectations
Chair: Mischa Suter (Geneva)
Alexia Yates (Manchester): Investor Time: A View from Nineteenth-century Europe
Ekaterina Svetlova (Twente): Economic Expectations in an Age of Artificial Intelligence

15:30 Coffee Break

16:00 Panel 2: Socialism and the Quest for Alternatives to Capitalism
Chair: David Rentsch (Bern)
Marcus Colla (Cambridge): Time Clashes - Global Capitalism and the Crisis of State Socialism

17:30 Keynote 1
Prasannan Parthasarathi (Boston): The Temporalities of Nature and Agriculture in Colonial South India
Chair: Moritz von Brescius (Harvard und Bern)

19:30 Dinner
FRIDAY, 24 JUNE

9:00 Panel 3: Time is Money
Chair: David Rentsch (Bern)

Mischa Suter (Geneva): Beyond Futurity and Acceleration: Uneven Temporalities of Money in Imperialism

Aidan Collins (Sheffield): The Timing of Failure in Bankruptcy Proceedings, 1674-1750

11:00 Coffee Break

11:00 Panel 4: Capitalist Time and the Biological Rhythms of Agriculture
Chair: Damien Clavel (Zurich)


Andreas Bolte (Freiburg): Temporalities of Rubber Production in Late Colonial Malaysia and Indonesia (1900-1940)

13:00 Lunch

14:30 Panel 5: Commodity Frontiers and Multi-temporal Regimes
Chair: Christof Dejung (Bern)

Francisco Rivera (Washington and Toronto): Capitalist Temporalities and Interrelations of Agropastoral and Industrial Spaces in Ollagüe, Northern Chile (1890-1992)

Javier Francisco (Freiburg): Multiple Temporal Regimes at Indigenous-Imperial Contact Zones in North America

16:00 Coffee Break
16:30  Panel 6 Macro-Temporalities: Cycles and Rhythms of Global Trade

Chair: Juri Auderset (Bern)


Lesley Nicola Braun (Basel), Rhythms of Trade and Siren Songs: Importation Practices in the Democratic Republic of Congo

20:00 Dinner

SUNDAY, 25 JUNE

9:00  Panel 7 Infrastructure and Material Flows

Chair: Alexander Engel (Basel)

Monika Dommann (Zurich): Just in Time. The Temporality of Material Flows and Warehouses

Juri Auderset (Bern): Filling Up the Pores of Farm Work: Time, Agriculture and Industrial Capitalism

10:30  Coffee Break

11:00  Panel 8: Scholarly Accounts of Economic Temporality

Chair: Moritz von Brescius (Harvard and Bern)

Alexander Engel (Basel): Bandits, Prophets, or Burros? Conceptualizing Speculators in Futures Markets

12:00  Concluding Discussion