

Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Practice

Workshop

May 5–6, 2011

**Historiographic Frontiers:
Site and Spatial Imagination in medieval and postmedieval
Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit Texts**

Thursday, May 5, 2011, 16.00 –19.00

Freie Universität Berlin, Room JK 24/122d, Habelschwerdter Allee 45

Travis Zadeh

(Haverford College, USA)

**Of Palimpsests and Acephalous Texts:
Tracing the Limits of Early 'Abbāsid Geography**

Friday, May 6, 2011, 10.00 –16.00

Freie Universität Berlin, Room J 23/6, Habelschwerdter Allee 45

Participants

Anubhuti Maurya (Bharati College, Delhi University)

Luther Obrock (University of California, Berkeley)

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It is daunting to contemplate thinking about “frontier” anew. As a concept or a term or a mode of analysis, it is ubiquitous in political thought and in scholarship from the late 19th century onwards and it cannot be claimed that there are hidden facets yet to be revealed. However, given that our daily lives still echo with “ungoverned spaces” and “chaotic frontier zones” (“frontier” is now rarely evoked as a term) in political and security formulations, our scholarship cannot declare “frontier” as a settled debate.

The “spatial turn”, drawing on works by Henri Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Casey, among others, has deservedly invigorated the frames within which we investigate and understand pasts and societies. The Lefebvrian concepts of ‘spatial practice’, ‘representations of space’ and ‘spaces of representation’ are greatly nuanced by thinkers as diverse as Paul Ricœur, Bruno Latour and Philip Ethington. Despite this richness of theoretical and site-specific monographs in urban history, some key terms and concepts continue to hold a rather un-complicated position in current scholarship. Frontier is one such concept which, though brilliantly elucidated in Lefebvre’s “A Geographical Introduction to History.”

This workshop wishes to engage, historically and historiographically, with a specific range of concepts which continue to dominate historical and philological sciences: border, boundary, center, frontier. This last – frontier – is paramount as our object of study.

We will focus our discussions from two key perspectives:

- The imperial genealogy of designating a space as “frontier”
- The view from “within”

By comparing, contrasting, thinking through these dual perspectives, we hope to situate the space in time and text and see how the tag frontier enables the production of ideas about a space and how it enables the production of specific texts.

Frontier as a space with a specific imaginary associated with it has enraptured poets and historians alike – from Walt Whitman to Frederick J. Turner to Igor Kopytoff. It is also a concept tied intricately to the history of empire, imperialism, and more recently, colonialism – perhaps best exemplified by the Romanes Lecture given at Oxford in 1907 by Lord George Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1898 – 1905. Frontiers, wherein he rhapsodized about that “outskirts of Empire, where the machine is relatively impotent and the individual is strong”. Here, pace Turner, is character made. Frontiers produced just as many anxieties as they produced delusions of grandeur in the heart of the Empire. In current scholarship, frontiers continue to be evoked as chaotic sites – “frontier zones, where boundaries between fractured and decaying empires and past kingdoms were eroding, where the further one got from centers of authority, the further removed from law and order, the lower the stakes, the greater the thrills” (Barkey, 2008). The frontier itself is a site of anxiety, of potential harm, of barbarians who could be marching towards the gate. It is this anxiety, this particular reading of the frontier that tends to dominate the imperial imagination—it clouds over the historical contingencies, the particularities or the specificities and instates, in its place, the caricature, the exotic, the unknown. This anxiety of the empire embeds itself in the frontier itself, waiting to be recalled, remembered and reproduced.

In the language of empire, this frontier space is posited as both empty (figuratively speaking) and chaotic (analytically speaking). It becomes a site of continuous contestation and battle and always remains, by definition, far removed from the ordered capital. It is in a state of permanent displacement full only of transitive populations. It is liminal, in the sense that it is at the margins, between zones, at the edge, unable to produce subjectivities of its own. Its inhabitants cannot be visualized historically, politically, or socially.

This workshop begins with the desire to plant our historiographical feet in the frontier space itself to see the concerns which emerge from within a regional imagination, in a regionally specific conversation and in the regional stories. Situating ourselves in the frontier reveals new topographies, varied perspectives, networks and routes that are invisible to the imperial eye.

We hope to visit specific sites which have, in historical record, a consistent recognition as “frontiers” – such as Kashmir, Tibet, Sindh or Assam. We begin with an examination of this historiography, detailing the ‘ajajib (wonders) or mal’aim (beasts) which inhabit these frontier sites, and build a catalogue of imperial discursive practices on this site. Keeping this register in our view, we will bring in the various historical, textual productions from within these sites, exposing the distancing of the gaze and the political understanding of the space itself. The texts produced in these regions and spaces also generate ideas about their frontier sites and project both an inward look and a carefully calibrated image for the consumption from outside. Resting between these two point of views, the center and the site, is a richer, more nuanced picture of the regional imagination, one that helps us distort the center-periphery or the network-route models of understanding medieval and post-medieval pasts.

Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship

The project Zukunftsphilologie endeavours to promote and emphasize primary textual scholarship beyond the classical humanistic canon. In an age of advanced communication, intellectual specialization, and unprecedented migration of knowledge and people, the discipline of philology assumes new relevance. Zukunftsphilologie aspires to support research in neglected varieties of philology with the explicit aim to integrate texts and scholarly traditions from Asia, Africa, the Middle East as well as from Europe itself.

Zukunftsphilologie refers to the polemic between the classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz and Friedrich Nietzsche around the method and meaning of classical studies. As a project it sees itself as part of a growing trend towards a more global intellectual history. It is inspired in particular by the work of Edward Said and Sheldon Pollock.

In order to promote historically-conscious philology, Zukunftsphilologie will foster research in the following areas: genealogies and transformations of philological practice, philology’s place in the system of knowledge (e.g. its relation to science, theology and jurisprudence), and philology and the university. Furthermore, Zukunftsphilologie aims to support critical reviews of historical and philological practice. In revisiting important “philological wars”, the goal is not to merely evaluate the argumentative worth of these debates, but to reflect on the wider cultural and political context in which these “philological wars” emerged and how they have shaped our knowledge of the past.

The project Zukunftsphilologie is co-directed by Angelika Neuwirth, Manan Ahmed and Islam Dayeh (all Freie Universität Berlin) and is associated with and located at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School for Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Zukunftsphilologie is a project at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

For more information on this workshop, please see:

<http://blogs.fu-berlin.de/frontiers/>

For more information on the project Zukunftsphilologie, please see:

www.forum-transregionale-studien.de

<http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/friedrichschlegel/promotionsprogramm/kooperationen/Zukunftsphilologie/index.html>

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