

We are pleased to invite proposals for papers in our upcoming workshop “Rethinking the Technical and the Human in Global Connectivity”. With this workshop we aim to explore ways to re-connect Social History in a materialist tradition and History of Technology within an African Historical context, and discuss fresh conceptual approaches. See the concept text here below.

The event will take place at the Humboldt Universität of Berlin’s Institute of Asian and African Studies, on the 24th and 25th of May 2019.

All paper proposals (**max. 250 words**) must be submitted to: [marie.huber@hu-berlin.de](mailto:marie.huber@hu-berlin.de) by **30 January 2019**. Please also include a one-page CV with your **institutional affiliation, position, name, and email address**. Proposals will be provisionally accepted in the second week of February.

Successful applicants will have travel (2nd class standard airfare), accommodation, and visa costs reimbursed. **We explicitly invite proposals from colleagues based in African institutions.**

Kind regards,

Robert Heinze, Bern University  
Baz Lecocq and Marie Huber, Humboldt Universitaet zu Berlin

The materiality of technologies and infrastructures is significant; however, we think their impact on and interaction with societies has to be analysed in a global dimension as well. We hope to establish this approach for the broader field of African History, reacting and bringing attention to a growing interest in these questions indicated in a number of recently developed research projects and publications.

Over the last decade, while questions of global connectivity have become mainstream in the field of history, the debate has, counter-intuitively, become somewhat disconnected from the material realities of that connectivity. This pertains all the more to Africa’s participation in processes of globalisation, with academic and political debates, both inside and outside the continent, being heavily dominated by the supposed “marginality” of Africa’s participation in globalisation and African out-migration. Debates about infrastructure services, until recently, emphasized concepts of informality and of “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2008). Rarely are African historians interested in the ways actual built service networks for electricity, water, or transport interact with increasingly globalising societies. In short, we feel these debates take for granted the actual mechanics of global connectivity; the techniques which enable and—in paradoxical ways—prevent the mobility of people, goods and ideas, in favour of a focus on the impact these people, goods and ideas have in various societies.

We argue that we need to consider the material infrastructures that undergird global networks in general, and in particular the more complicated and less clearly documented ways in which such infrastructures are organised on the African continent.

On the other hand, the History of Technology and Engineering (traditionally the place for such a materialist reading) has for a long time focused on the developments in

engineering itself, on technical advancements, and on the individual men producing them; this at the neglect of their social, cultural and political impacts. Inversely, Science and Technology Studies focus on the social and cultural embeddedness of the 'hard sciences', showing how science and technology are cultural and social products in themselves. These inward perspectives leave the interaction between technological, social, cultural and political frameworks neglected.

We hold the prerequisite that the material and discursive limitations and possibilities of any network technology are co-determinant to the range of global connectivity, justifying further research in the connection between the social, the cultural, and the technical.

In this workshop, we would like to reconnect the technological history of infrastructure services with the history of social, cultural, and political connection, that came about by the transport of people, goods, and ideas, enabled by these very infrastructure services. To formulate it in the terms of Hård and Jamison (2005), we would like to engage in a social and cultural assessment of technologies of infrastructure service, which balances the relation between technical possibilities and limitations and their human assessment and appropriation in the culture of technically altered space and time.

The workshop is intended to focus on the conceptual and theoretical aspects of our reassessment. How can we bring the spatial turn, the technology turn, and the discursive turn back in connection with each other, while situating African infrastructure and transport networks in the global context? What are the specific conceptual questions that arise out of the application of these larger theoretical frameworks to African societies? Which analytical tools should we employ? We welcome contributions exploring these and other questions from a historical viewpoint, ranging from case studies to comparative analyses to reviews and theoretical and methodological works.