

Call for Participations: Foundation of a research network “Modern expeditions: Politics, actors and epistemologies of scientific travel since the nineteenth century”

Eike-Christian Heine, Braunschweig, Germany, 17 October 2019

We are preparing an application before the end of the year for a series of up to four workshops with 20 colleagues between November 2020 and November 2022 in different German universities and research institutions. We will also invite different keynote speakers to these workshops. Our goal is to establish a network and prepare the publication of an edited volume. For information about the corresponding DFG’s funding-program see: https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/individual/scientific_networks/index.html

We are inviting everyone who is working on the history of expeditions (especially – but not exclusively – in the twentieth century) to send us an **abstract outlining your research interest and a short CV until 1 December (either to eike-christian.heine@tu-bs.de or alternatively to eikechristian.heine@gmail.com)**.

If the application is successful, the funding provided by the DFG opens the possibility for historians, sociologists, ethnographers etc. without sufficient travel funds of their own to participate in the network. Accordingly, we would be very happy to also receive proposals from colleagues outside Europe and the USA.

Expeditions

Victorian expeditions that investigated solar eclipses, crossings of continents with cars, airplanes and airships in the Interwar period, experimental archaeology and the Kon-Tiki’s Pacific voyage, Cold war explorations of the deep sea and outer space: In modern history, expeditions proved of enormous significance for the production of e.g. environmental knowledge, the testing of new technologies, the representation of political ambition, or the general understanding of the earth and the universe. Expeditions continue to be important: Current concepts of global warming are relying on data from expeditions to glaciers and the Antarctic, and expeditions to the sea floor are instrumental in claiming national sovereignty over resources.

The planned network will focus on expeditions in the nineteenth and especially twentieth century. Expeditions into extreme environments like the deep sea, the sea floor, the arctic, deserts, rainforests or outer space connect spatial expansion and scientific research. They produce pictures and narratives which show to researchers, technicians and the public the historic relations between humans, civilization and nature. Such undertakings lead into places, which appear from Europe and other “centers” as remote, undeveloped, dangerous or unknown. Yet, often these places were inhabited, and western travelers relied on the knowledge and the work of inhabitants or turned these people to research objects. Additionally, research expeditions more and more became big science. Enormous technical, logistical and financial efforts were necessary to bring researchers to remote and extreme environments, and to collect and process data in order to pursue multi-disciplinary research questions. Since high modernity, “expedition” refers to an organized, specialized and often highly technical undertaking, which successively visits a number of places around the globe, to undertake a variety of research questions from different disciplines.

Aims of the network

The network brings together doctoral students, post-docs and young professors who are working on the history of expeditions in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century. Starting in November 2020 the network will organize four meetings in three years. We will discuss the dynamics between technical innovation, scientific research, environmental properties, popular narratives and visualizations, asymmetries of colonial power, national competition and cooperation. The goal is to establish a research network and prepare the publication of an edited volume.

Three thematic approaches: politics, actors and epistemologies

Three thematic approaches will structure the series of workshops. The first focusses on technopolitics (Hecht) of expeditions between empire, Cold war, and multipolar world order. What roles did geopolitical consideration play when expeditions were launched? How did strategic considerations change technological designs or influence scientific questions? What did motivate the state and other actors to pay for expensive modern expeditions? What do expeditions tell about the relations between science, technology, national and international politics in the twentieth century? What strategies shaped co-operation, e.g. within the blocs of the Cold War or between the blocs?

The second approach deals with the scientists and other members of the expeditions themselves, as well as the people they interact with in the field. We will identify topoi and narratives which shape the public image of expeditions. European or Western self-images will be confronted and compared with the practices on the field. How did researchers stage themselves; which clichés of gender and race were reaffirmed or undermined? Which role did nature, technology and science play in popular reports? In the confrontation with extreme environments, knowledge and perceptions of the human body became important: What role did or does the human body play in modern expeditions?

The third approach will investigate the specific epistemologies of expeditions. What kind of knowledge and practices characterizes expeditions? How does the production of knowledge relate to the development of technologies and the researched environments? Other questions involve e.g. the relations between laboratory and field studies. How do expeditions produce and use specific instruments and artefacts like research ships, field-laboratories, large logistic-networks or global infrastructures? The produced knowledge and its representation in maps, diagrams or narratives will also be addressed. The automation and standardization of measurements and their computerized analysis are possible topics.

If you have any questions or want to submit a proposal, don't hesitate to contact us.

Dr. Eike-Christian Heine
Technische Universität Braunschweig
Institut für Geschichtswissenschaft
Abt. Wissenschafts- und Technikgeschichte
Schleinitzstr. 13
D-38106 Braunschweig
Homepage: <https://www.ifg-braunschweig.de/dr-eike-christian-heine/>
Email: eike-christian.heine@tu-braunschweig.de

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