

Call for Papers

Nomad Properties. Political Anthropologies of Nomadism from the 18th Century until Today

Workshop at the University of Erfurt from June 30 to July 2, 2022

In the ancient narrative of the emergence of civilization, nomadism serves as a negative mirror of agricultural sedentariness. The juxtaposition of the farmer and the nomad can already be found in the bible. Genesis 3.19 reads: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will.” And the praise of self-disciplined, hard physical field work is not exclusive to Christianity. Shennong, the Farmer God of ancient China, who first formed a plough from wood and told the black-haired people how to use it, is just one example.

The political anthropology of the nomad holds that unlike the farmer, who lives a well-ordered, disciplined life, the nomad is not tied to land and thus mobile, unsteady, improvident, and not in control of his or her appetites. The farmer follows a cycle of self-discipline, cultivates the land, makes it prosper, and thus furthers civilization – whilst the nomad just consumes the fruits of the earth without investing any labor into it. This narrative is specifically powerful in the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, Herder speaks of man as a deficient being whose universalistic inadaptation bears the properties of the nomad. The nomad thus must be civilized by second nature. In this sense, the nomad remains the “primitive” until the late 20th century, whether as a subject from the colonies, a member of the lower classes, or as a migrant – a view that only recently has been called into question (e.g. James C. Scott).

Beyond this narrative, however, a cultural discourse emerged that offered an alternate, positive understanding of the nomad. In the critique of science and capitalism of the 1960s and 1970s, “nomadic thinking” (Deleuze/Guattari) became a positive example for opposing political, economic and scientific hegemonies. Yet against the background of a neoliberal, (post-)industrial growth society, which has privatized all fields of nature and society, the nonconformism and flexibility of thought and action called for in this postmodern framework has been appropriated as a virtue of a simultaneously precarious and privileged global nomadism (migrant workers vs. managers). Today, nomadism appears to be a contemporary form of life that characterizes a growing number of people (cf. Rosi Braidotti). These people can be poor or rich, they might themselves identify as nomads, or they might prefer not to. From travelling day laborers to refugees of war, to scientists, to a global managerial class, nomadic forms of life seem to be on the rise again. They can be voluntary or forced, temporal or permanent. And yet with the call for new forms of subsistence economy, the negative connotation of the anthropological figure of the nomad is beginning to reappear, although nomadic/migrant thinking remains a point of reference for emancipatory theory formation.

At our workshop, we want to relate historical instances of nomadism to the role of “the nomad” in political discourses and recent theoretical debates. We want to ask about nomadic habits and nomad properties and their relation to property structures: (How) is the trajectory of the political anthropology of the nomad related to the structural change of property? We are interested in discussing these questions not only with historians and sociologists but with the visual and liberal arts and other forms of referencing the nomadic as well. We especially invite proposals which take on historical and contemporary empirical societal developments from a theorized perspective on nomadism.

The workshop is organized by the Erfurt-based research project “Property and Habits” which is part of the DFG-Collaborative Research Centre “Structural Change of Property”. The workshop is planned as an in-person workshop taking place in Erfurt from Thursday, June 30, to Saturday, July 2, 2022.

Proposals for presentations should be sent to anna.moellers@uni-erfurt.de or dirk.schuck@uni-erfurt.de by February 12th 2022. They should have a length of approx. 200—300 words. We strongly invite contributions by women or minority groups within the research field.

Research Project “Property and Habits”:

<https://sfb294-eigentum.de/en/subprojects/besitz-und-gewohnheit/>

DFG-Special-Research-Field “Structural Changes of Property”:

<https://sfb294-eigentum.de/en/>