

PIERRE DU BOIS ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2019

Thursday 3 October 2019 – 08:30 | Friday 4 October 2019 – 18:30

→ Auditorium, The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies,
Maison de la paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2, 1202 Geneva

MICROCOSMS OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

CAROLYN BILTOFT AND AMALIA RIBI-FORCLAZ

BACKGROUND NOTE

Since the crisis of 2008, there has been an interdisciplinary call to look more holistically and in novel ways at the dynamics of historical capitalism.¹ Historians have turned increasingly to the distant and more recent past in search of new thought lines and explanatory mechanisms for grasping the nature of markets and their impact on human life. Within this emerging field described broadly as ‘the history of capitalism’ scholars have set out to re-think a wide range of phenomena including the origins and evolution of trading, financial and manufacturing industries but also the social transformations of and interactions with labor, migration, family, gender, class and race.²

The aim of the 2019 Pierre du Bois Annual Conference is to contribute to this flourishing field of historical research by approaching the history of capitalism through the framework of microcosm. The term microcosm has long connoted a space or an object wherein the ‘whole’ of a broader phenomenon appears within a smaller scale or significant part. In the ancient context, scholars considered human beings to be microcosms of the universe at large, thus to study and to know a single person, was to grasp the workings of the cosmos. This perspective has garnered critical renewal in the emerging field of ‘global micro-history,’ which has pioneered efforts to seeing broad scale processes in a single place, space, or even within the bounds of a single human life.³

In this frame, this conference seeks to illuminate the ‘macrocosm’ of modern global capitalism, through a number of microscopic lenses. Rather than describing the evolution and transformation of capitalism as a historical process, the conference seeks to genuinely ‘rethink’ the nature of the system itself by challenging some of its historical and conceptual tenets. Thus each thematic panel will constitute a shared ‘vantage point’ through which a range of scholars seek to cast new light on the economic dimensions of global history.

The conference will include the following thematic panels, which will take place over two days:

- The territory: spaces of interior capital
- The body and soul: health, wealth, and the nature of the human
- The ‘human heart’: capitalism and its emotional registers
- The company: on profit and its pursuits
- The grid: on currents and capital flows
- The market: money, taxes, and investments
- The fields: the soil, its fruits and its labors
- The text as microcosm: narratives of scope and scale

The conference will also include a keynote address by Professor Harold James from Princeton University on ‘The Family and the Microstructures of Capitalism’.

¹ Andrew Calabrese and Colin Sparks, *Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Jeffrey A. Frieden, *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007). William H. Sewell, ‘A Strange Career: The Historical Study of Economic Life,’ *History and Theory* 49, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 146–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2010.00564.x>.

² Jeremy Adelman and Jonathan Levy, ‘The Fall and Rise of Economic History,’ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 1, 2014, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-FallRise-of-Economic/150247>; Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³ Francesca Trivellato, ‘Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?’, *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>.