

Republic of Plants

Conference-Workshop: Chennai, India, 10-14 December 2019

Concept Note

We are pleased to announce that a Workshop-Conference entitled "Republic of Plants" will be held in the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IITM) from the 10th to 14th of December 2019. This is an extension of an ongoing collaborative work "Moving Crops and the Scales of History" - a joint research and book-writing project under the aegis of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin (<https://www.mpiwgberlin.mpg.de/research/projects/moving-crops-and-scale-history>). Its principal collaborators include Francesca Bray, Barbara Hahn, John Bosco Lourdusamy, and Tiago Saraiva as well as Dagmar Schaefer and Alina-Sandra Cucu of the Max Planck Institute. We invite scholars to join us in a "Republic of Plants" with the aim of building a long-term Consortium - a network of scholars working through crops on intersections between environment, nutrition, and medicine; between past and the present; and between the global and local.

Moving Crops offers a contribution from historians of agriculture to the growing spectrum of projects challenging Eurocentric accounts of the role of technology in the colonial and global eras. To this end, we have developed the concept of cropscape, which denotes an assemblage formed around a crop, the heterogeneous elements deliberately or fortuitously brought together in a specific location and moment to make and grow a crop: plants, people and pests; technologies, skills and ideas; tastes and markets; environment and biology; labour and capital, etc (see <https://www.francescabray.co.uk/cropscapes> for some examples). As well as underlining the historical contingency of such actors and their associations, the term cropscape draws attention to the nested spatial and temporal dimensions of growing a crop, from the level of the international market to that of a plant's root system, and to the criss-crossing trajectories that maintain, destabilise or transform these associations. The concept of cropscape also encourages us to play with unexpected backgrounding and foregrounding or hierarchies of agency, putting plants themselves, with their likes and dislikes, characteristics and proclivities, centre stage. We see cropscales as an ideal concept for exploring materialities as a historical heuristic.

As part of this project, the Moving Crops collaborators now call for scholars working on crops to participate in the “Republic of Plants,” by proposing papers for a five-day conference in Chennai hosted by the Indian Institute of Technology Madras from 10 to 14 December, 2019. The conference will be organized as a Workshop for presentation and discussion of ongoing research. **The aim of the Workshop and the long-term mission of the consortium is to integrate issues of food, health, labor and environment in a holistic way.** Whether we are foregrounding ecological sustainability, health or food provision, societies are profoundly shaped by crop-systems. Hence the Workshop will take crops as its focus to explore the historical legacy of local crop choices, their current socioeconomic, technical-environmental and health-nutrition impact, their linkages to global formations and flows of knowledge and capital, and their prospects for future resilience and sustainability. Thus we would include the 'lowly' millets and the hill cottons of subsistence and tribal worlds, alongside the rice and wheat of prospering deltas, the BT cottons and GM eggplants of the industrial economy, and the organic and local of the sustainable markets.

Keeping the "Republic" democratic would mean counting as knowledge citizens its farmers, its elders, activists, civil society members and consumers, alongside historians and scholars. With this in mind two special events are planned as part of the Workshop: first, a public event, where a mixed panel of experts, activists and policy makers will reflect on what lessons the history of the *longue durée* offers to the future; and second, a special concluding day (14th Dec) - aimed at collective reflections on material knowledge and practices of farmers with crops being seen as plant, as heritage, as revolution, as livelihood, as industry, as food and fabric, as story-telling and song, and as the very essence of life. The day will also be marked by a 'food fiesta' capturing some of these aspects 'live'.

In short, we aim to bring together established experts and young academics on crop history, rural development and crop science - specialising on Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia, USA and Europe, and to bring in practitioners and policy makers on the ground for mutual and fruitful exchange of understandings. These, we hope, would lead to opening up possibilities for long-term collaborations between academia, policy makers and other stakeholders.