CFP: “Habitability and Empire,” University College Dublin/Online, 23-24 June 2022

Discussion published by Lachlan Fleetwood on Wednesday, January 12, 2022

CFP: “Habitability and Empire”

A two-day conference exploring ideas of ‘habitability’ and ‘uninhabitability’ in the context of empire and the changing limits of life on Earth

23-24 June 2022

University College Dublin

Notions of ‘habitability’ and ‘uninhabitability’ have long captured human imaginations. From the Greek idea of the oikoumene; to environmentally determinist theories of race and civilisation; to unprecedented climatic changes in the age of the Anthropocene; to searching the universe for new ‘habitable planets,’ ideas of habitability have been incorporated into a wide range of thinking on society, culture, politics, philosophy, geography, environment, science and cosmology. Understandings of the shape and stability of the ‘habitable globe’ have nevertheless varied enormously throughout human history. Likewise, definitions of habitability have rarely been free from political interest or cultural bias, and were frequently bound up in the imperial appropriation of territories and people.

The category of habitability thus represents a fundamental – yet surprisingly understudied - way of tracing debates around environmental stability and change over a range of timescales. Especially from the eighteenth century onwards, these questions took on new significance in the context of imperial expansion and settler-colonialism on a global scale, where new sciences including geology, climatology and ecology brought about new ways of measuring and defining the limits of life on Earth. It was also often recognised these limits were not only natural, and that human intervention could alter habitability, sometimes for better but often for worse (for example, expanding the limits of habitability via technologies from irrigation to
Following a summer in which parts of Europe flooded while others burned, it is increasingly apparent that long inhabited parts of the world are on course to become uninhabitable within our lifetimes (as the Sixth Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from August 2021 also starkly warns). As astronomers and billionaires continue to search the universe for new habitable planets, it is equally critical to understand and historicise the limits of habitability on this one. The conference aims to place scientific and cultural ideas of ‘habitability’ and ‘uninhabitability’ in their historical contexts, and to reflect on how they can help us to think proactively about our relationship to the environment in an age of climate crisis. Among others, we will consider the following questions:

- How and why has the world been divided into ‘habitable’ or ‘uninhabitable’ regions?
- In what ways were ideas of a limited and/or differentially ‘habitable earth,’ ‘habitable globe’ or ‘habitable world’ deployed and revised in the context of empires, from the eighteenth century to the present?
- What have been the social, cultural and political consequences when places that have long been ‘habitable’ become ‘uninhabitable’?
- When or why have empires intentionally or deliberately tried to render places uninhabitable?
- How has nonhuman habitability overlapped and interacted with questions about the limits of habitability for humans?
- Can the concept of ‘habitability’ present a viable alternative to the now ubiquitous ‘Anthropocene’ for bridging humanities and natural sciences to communicate the current climate crisis?

While primarily historical in its methodological focus, interest is the conference is also very much welcomed from adjacent disciplines including the history of science, geography, literary studies, and environmental humanities (indeed ‘habitability studies’ is an inherently interdisciplinary project). Papers from early career (including graduate) as well as established scholars, and dealing with the theme of habitability and empire from the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries (in any part of the world) are all welcome.
If possible the conference will take place in Dublin, though this will of course depend on the prevailing Covid-19 situation and health guidelines. Contingencies for some or all speakers to present via Zoom will be available if required. Should the conference take place in person, it is anticipated that some support for travel/accommodation may be available (with priority given to ECRs and those with the highest need). To express your interest in the conference, please submit a 300 word abstract and CV by 18 February 2022.

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