Entanglements are the order of the day. In the last two decades or so, the notion of entanglement has not only been very popular with historians (histoire croisée, Verflechtungsgeschichte), but also on fields such as comparative literature, cultural anthropology, archeology, and some social sciences. The concept of entanglement enables researchers to avoid dealing with clearly (pre-)defined social or political entities. It has awarded researchers the opportunity to attain a freely chosen vantage point with regard to both their evidence and concepts. Finally, it has proved especially suitable for the analysis of social, intellectual and political agency and interdependencies because of the concept’s capacity to break down asymmetries, dilute binaries and highlight questions of process (how?) over quiddity (what?) and cause (why?).

The conference on ‘Harmful Entanglements’ thus addresses a phenomenon caused not so much by a principal methodological flaw in the concept of entanglement. Rather, it aims to answer to the unacknowledged conditions of the concept’s ubiquity, or, with other words, by its own ‘entanglement’ in a particular political context. Arguably, the study of and the various approaches to entanglements are products of an era of run-away globalisation and the heuristic possibilities it has enabled/unleashed. Scholars also began to ask questions that, to a degree, mirror the concerns and expectations of this kind of neo-liberal instability and acceleration. While many studies of entanglement were fed by general optimism in their transformative power, significant research has also been conducted on problems created by entanglement that encompasses topics such as environmental history, international law and diplomacy, (post-) colonialism, and the position of racist and fascist cultural production in the history of modernity or the project of modernism.

By and large, however, a silent assumption has been dominant: entanglement has come to be considered a phenomenon that obeys a logic of accretion. Entanglement by default seems not to lead to disentanglement but to a new level of tighter entanglement.
The last few years with their crises of contagion, war, and economic rifts and collapses may offer a good occasion to question this assumption. It seems to be time to look at those who in the past or today reject to be entangled and at those entanglements that apparently proved detrimental. We aim to ask questions such as: What kind of entanglements have been regarded as sufficiently “bad” (harmful, exploitative, morally or legally unjustifiable, politically flawed, economically costly and so on) to provoke attempts at disentanglement? As dependencies (they may be understood as mutual as ever) involve power inequalities, the question of agency in disentanglements becomes crucial: What regimes of power trigger decolonialisation and neo-colonialisation processes? Do harmful entanglements lead to cultures of the vernacular, the backwater, the obscure – or at least to a longing for them? Do ever-increasing entanglements continuously diminish agency and lead to an animosity against connectedness (as is observable in the present conjuncture of failing optimism in globalization)? Which actors are prone to fear or reject entanglements as principally dangerous or disastrous? When and why do attempts at disentanglement fail?

This year’s Max Weber Foundation Conference is already the eighth such meeting organised by the Max Weber Foundation for German Humanities Institutes Abroad. The previous conferences of this format took place at the German Historical Institutes in Paris, Warsaw, Moscow, Washington, Kairo, Rome, and Tokyo. The Foundation Conference format takes up research topics from the institutes of the Max Weber Foundation and discusses them in an internationally comparative, trans- and interdisciplinary manner. The Foundation Conferences involve all of the Foundation’s institutes and their partners.

The conference will take place in connection with the opening of the new building of the Orient-Institut Istanbul in the centre of Istanbul, in Galip Dede Caddesi 65, close to the Galata Tower. Keynotes will be delivered by Prof. em. Dr. Monica Juneja (Heidelberg University) and Prof. Dr. Eugene Rogan (Oxford University).

We invite papers that engage with these or related problems in the past or present and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Funding (travel-expenses, board and lodging) are available for participants not affiliated with the Max Weber Foundation. The language of the conference is English. A volume of contributions will be published.

Please apply with an abstract of two pages and a cv to https://www.oiiist.org/cfc/. Deadline for applications is Sunday February 25th.