

December 15, 2008

Dear Colleagues,

With this announcement of our new theme the EIHS Steering Committee would like to extend our appreciation to the forty members of the department -- faculty and graduate students -- who took the time to offer us their thoughtful and provocative suggestions. The EIHS Steering Committee -- Valerie Kivelson, Damon Salesa, Christian DePee, EIHS graduate research fellow, Lenny Urena, and I -- deliberated your suggestions in two lengthy and lively meetings. We invited incoming director, Ron Suny, to join us in this discussion, as he will shape and oversee the intellectual realization of this theme over the next two years. While it may not be obvious at first glance, this theme responds to a notable interest this year in environments and ecologies, just as the "topographies" in our current theme sought to take up the suggestions of the last round for a theme on space. While some of the suggested themes had an implicit or explicit temporal bias, we sought to select one that could spark fruitful exploration of all historical periods and geographies. While our new theme stems from and is situated in the intellectual community here at Michigan, our discussions also considered the themes of our "partner" Institutes for Historical Studies (Texas, Maryland, Princeton, Rutgers) and the position of EIHS within this growing cluster of Institutes.

In the coming weeks we will begin planning the events for fall 2009 and extending invitations to prospective speakers. As always, we invite (and rely upon!) your nominations of speakers whose interests and expertise broadly address this theme, which you should direct to eihs.sc@umich.edu. We would also like to announce the SC decision -- in response to your suggestions -- that next year two of our featured speakers each term will be members of our own faculty, who will not be bound in any sense by the theme. We have noted the excellent turnout and the excitement in the room when our own colleagues lecture, and we realize that these events have a special place in building our intellectual community.

With best wishes for a relaxing break,

Kathleen

Kathleen Canning
Arthur F. Thurnau Professor
Director, Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies

over

Introducing our new theme...

PAUCITY & PLENTY

ENACTMENTS & EXPECTATIONS

As the global collapse of financial markets draws our attention to the stark contrasts between paucity and plenty across the world, it also renders visible the extent to which human actions, perceptions, and expectations shape these conditions. With this theme we aim to historicize scarcity and abundance, and to problematize their diverse historical expressions: economic, environmental, spatial, temporal, legal, social, cultural, and spiritual. We view this theme as timely, not only in the context of current events, but also as reflecting a productive epistemological and methodological moment in historical thinking. With this theme, we reconsider the tensions of poverty, deprivation, wealth, and excess—the preoccupations of an older economic and social history—aided by the questions, methods, and insights of the cultural and transnational historiographic turns. This theme presents an opportunity to explore new approaches to familiar historical questions, widening the terms of abundance and scarcity to encompass an examination of changing forms of material and immaterial production, environmental scarcity and engagement, disasters of famine and drought, and crises of bodies, health and medicine, along with the forms of social inequality and social movements they have produced.

The study of paucity and plenty can be pursued at different scales: within intimate domains, inside states or nations, or across larger geographically dispersed networks, including new forms of empire—each with its own unequal relations and distributions of resources, goods, value, and practices. Race, gender, class, age, and subject location are routinely enacted in the arrangements of paucity and plenty. Moral and religious belief systems engage with questions of accumulation and charity, economies of the afterlife, and their implications for the distribution of worldly goods. This theme also offers occasion to contemplate the role of the imaginary and the performative: displays of difference in wealth and status, the enactment of sumptuary laws, the meanings of decadence and indulgence, consumption and waste, specters of futures and pasts, and the enforcement of regimes of paucity within cultures of plenty.

We welcome speaker suggestions and ask that you e-mail nominations to the EIHS Steering Committee; sc.eihs@umich.edu