

Call for Papers

Striking Back? On Imperial Fantasies and Fantasies of Empire

Conference to be held at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany, 12-13 September 2019

“Empire” is a dominant fantasy of our day and age. As a concept, an object of research and a target of political critique, it has experienced a dramatic renaissance since the turn of this century—“empire” seems to be expanding, as it is wont to do. It has inspired Marxist manifestos (Hardt and Negri 2000; Harvey 2003), reanimated postcolonial critique (Mehta 1999; Stoler 2016), and fueled innovative imperial histories (Barkey 2008; Judson 2016; Kivelson and Suny 2016; Daughton 2006; Howe 2009). From the opposite pole of the political spectrum, apologies for empire have always existed, though they have increased in frequency and volume in the vexatious time of Brexit (Ferguson 2018). Finally, empire, its powers and discontents have a long history in science fiction and fantasy, from H. G. Wells’ marauding Martians (Cantor and Hufnagel 2006) to the Death Star’s depredations. With its vividness and verve, fantasy appears as an opportune form of thought and genre with which to grasp imperialism and its consequences (Rieder 2008; Hoagland and Sarwal 2010).

In sum, fantasies of imperial conquest and management continue to shape the present, while fantastical images of empire saturate the field of mass culture. Our interdisciplinary, exploratory conference, *Striking Back? On Imperial Fantasies and Fantasies of Empire*, seeks to articulate and to explore this tension. We invite contributions from political theorists, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, scholars of comparative literature and sundry interrogators of colonialism and imperialism that speak to two broad questions and themes. First, how are we to understand *imperial fantasies* as lived political formations, present and past structures that inform and mould the world in which we live in? Secondly, what political, social and semiotic lives are lived by *fantasies of empire*?

On a conceptual plane, we aspire to mediate productively between the two dominant currents of theorization about fantasy: the Marxian and the psychoanalytic. From Marx and his legatees, we take the fundamental lesson that, in societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, real life is itself fantastical (Miéville 2002: 42). From Freud, Lacan, and their interpreters, we inherit a notion of fantasy as inherent to the making and breaking of realities. Rather than an escape from or a supplement to the real, fantasy, as Lauren Berlant has mused, animates “the unconscious continuities we project that allow us to trust the world enough to test it and change ourselves” (Manning and Berlant 2018). In this spirit, we heed China Miéville’s call for a “notion of fantasy as embedding potential transformation and emancipation in human thinking” (2002: 46). Furthermore, we contend that this project entails explicit attention to the constitutive doubleness of fantasy as a mode of power and as a genre of speculation about this power.

A series of questions follows. What can we learn about the means and ends of imperial power from fictional fantasies about empire(s)? How are the genres of fantasy and science fiction themselves entangled with imperialist projects and worldviews? Pursuing the relationships between imperial fantasies and other, competing and converging fantasies of the political, we might ask how imperial fantasies and nationalist fantasies conflict and collaborate. How often is “empire” in the eye of the beholder, as easily clothed in the costumes of a neofascist as a neoliberal? *Who is it that’s striking back?*

Our conference will convene at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, in Göttingen, Germany, on 12-13 September 2019. Conference participants will be provided with lodging and will be reimbursed for their travel (up to 350 € within Europe and € 800 for intercontinental travel). Please send abstracts of 250 words, along with a brief academic biography, to Marina Cziesielsky at Cziesielsky@mmg.mpg.de by 1 May 2019. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you should have further questions. Further information is available at <http://www.mmg.mpg.de/departments/max-planck-research-group-empires-of-memory/>

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