

## Tuning Empires: Teaching Transnational Citizenship and Empires

Petó, Andrea

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## **Tuning Empires. Teaching transnational citizenship and empires at the Central European University**

*Andrea Petö*

The course was developed by Maria Lafuente, Berteke Waaldijk, Margot Birriel, Izabella Agardi, Mary Clancy, Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, Leena Kurvet-Kaosaar, Annika Olsson, Sabine Grenz after a survey of the countries involved (the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Ireland, Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Italy) as far as teaching empires are concerned. The teachers looked at existing courses and teaching modules in institutions of higher education while developing the course. Thus, the course is based on what receives very little or no attention in these institutions - the imperial pasts of the respective countries - and aims to go beyond an unproblematic discussion of empire and develop a diachronic approach to the ways in which empires rose, peaked and perished. The purpose was to exercise a more theoretically-informed investigation into local specificities, in a sort of synchronic vein, and contemporary national cases in order to gain more nuanced insights into how the mechanisms of imperial power took effect and what resonances and legacies empires still have in certain national and cultural contexts. More precisely, the course was concerned with the theoretical and practical issues of teaching empires and the construction of our knowledge about empires. It set out to discuss a range of imperial contexts from, for instance, the Russian, Soviet, Ottoman, Portuguese, Danish, Habsburg, Swedish, Spanish, through to the German, Nazi, Fascist, Dutch, Belgian, and British empires. Yet, despite the ample scholarly attention to matters of empire, very few studies consider the problematic place and effort of women. It is the uncharted territory of empire and so the core aim of this working group was to explore how empire constructs and is constructed by gendered cultural and political practices. The course considered the theoretical dimension, particularly of teaching empires in a comparative context, and examined objects of empire, including textiles, dress and colour, narratives and political discourses of empire.

The course aimed to suggest how questions about women can change how we think about imperial ideologies, structures, oppressions, failures and legacies with analyzing methodologies, vocabularies and historical relationships among economic historical and cultural production. Such information and knowledge will, in turn, advance our understanding of European and imperial histories. An important task, in the light of such ambitious but necessary research planning, was to make this mammoth objective manageable. Therefore, specific contexts were a

core concern. An important overall object then took shape along the lines of selected concepts which could guide our thinking about empires. We also paid a great deal of attention to the narration of empire through text, image, textiles, dress, and artefact and to the ways in which empire is gendered, variously and consistently, over time and place. Since the course was both interdisciplinary as well as international, its interests and audience were to be found in literary studies, history, film studies, museum studies, anthropology, political studies.

The course started with an introduction by Andrea Pető, who was followed by different guest speakers. The summarizing meeting checked the results of the course as far as competencies were concerned. Enrolled students were required to regularly attend classes taught by the lecturer and the guest lecturers and to participate in the class discussions, which are based on the readings for that particular week and to write a paper of 10 to 15 pages for the class. Each lecturer suggested one film connected to the topic. The films, the electronic versions of the readings and useful links were placed on the course module. The students were requested to make critical references to at least one of the films of the series in their final paper.

## Competencies

Generic competencies:

- ✓ To think about sources and resources in a European or international framework offers enticing intellectual scope and freedom where existing ideas, including those of the participants, are shaped through open discussion;
- ✓ Critically assess and compare class readings and lectures, according to theoretical arguments put forward, and the methods used to support these arguments;
- ✓ Identify and research a topic of theoretical relevance to the themes of the course through primary and secondary sources;
- ✓ Present a critical analysis in writing backed up by evidence and arguments from course readings and/or primary research materials;
- ✓ Demonstrate the ability to analyze, assess and compare course readings through oral participation in class.

Specific competencies:

- ✓ To recognize and analyze the ways in which notions of gender, race, region and sexuality are implicated in the practices and discourses of empires through discussions of course readings, lectures and final papers;
- ✓ Awareness of own position in relationship to race and gender and the ability to integrate this awareness into the learning experience;
- ✓ Willingness and competency to deal with diversity in diverse groups (gender, ethnicity, nationality);

- ✓ Competency to deal with the different concepts of private and public histories and its consequences for the construction of gender;
- ✓ Understanding the construction of transnational citizenship;
- ✓ Understanding how diverging cultures have been constructed by imperial forces;
- ✓ Think critically and in a differentiated way about empires and dictatorships. Positioning oneself as a researcher who is not independent from these power structures. (this was an important outcome of discussions with students);
- ✓ To be able to study micro and macro levels in relation to each other based on a multiplicity of source material (this was echoed by the students' reactions to/ reflections on the course material);
- ✓ To identify and research a topic of theoretical relevance to the themes of the course through primary and secondary sources;
- ✓ To make interconnections between nationalism, gender and clothing (this was scrutinized in one of the final papers written for the course in a highly sophisticated and nuanced manner);
- ✓ The ability to critically investigate power relations and local cultures were made by students in different contexts without upright dismissal or uncritical sentimentalization;
- ✓ To avoid the usage of imperial as well as national frameworks of analysis and to be conscious of the implications of both.