

MESAAS Courses Spring 2026

COLLOQUIUM ON MAJOR TEXTS

AHUM UN1399

Professor Sarah bin Tyeer

Professor Wael Hallaq

Professor Elaine van Dalen

Readings in translation and discussion of texts of Middle Eastern and Indian origin. Readings may include the Quran, Islamic philosophy, Sufi poetry, the Upanishads, Buddhist sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, Indian epics and drama, and Gandhi's Autobiography.

INTRODUCTION TO SOUTH ASIA

MDES UN1630, Professor Jonathan Peterson

Monday/Wednesday: 11:40 AM-12:55 PM

This course introduces students to South Asia through an analysis of the heterogeneity, richness, and complexity of the region's conflicted pasts. Our historical scope is vast and ambitious, starting with the earliest urban settlements in about 2000BCE and ending in the present. Though focused on "South Asia," the course problematizes the bounded areal model by emphasizing the region's enduring connections to Eurasia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the broader Indian Ocean world. With connected history as our method, the course asks students to grapple with South Asia's literary, religious, and political histories as kinetic processes. This allows us to ask probing questions about issues that have had, and continue to have, major implications for the region—and the world—today: sovereignty, power, gender, community, devotion, piety, secularism, democracy, violence, and the nation itself.

THEORY AND CULTURE

MDES UN3000, Professor Hamid Dabashi

Tuesday/Thursday: 10:10-11:25 AM

Required of all majors. Introduces theories of culture particularly related to the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Theoretical debates on the nature and function of culture as a symbolic reading of human collectivities. Examines critical cultural studies of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Enables students to articulate their emerging knowledge of Middle East, South Asian, and African cultures in a theoretically informed language.

Palestinian and Israeli Politics and Societies

MDES UN3042, Professor Joseph Massad

Tuesday/Thursday: 2:40-3:55 PM

The History of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskala) in 19th century Europe and the development of Zionism through the current peace process between the state of Israel and the Arab states and the Palestinian national movement. Provides a historical overview of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict to familiarize undergraduates with the background of the current situation. No P/D/F or R credit is allowed for this class.

RETHINKING MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

MDES UN3260, Professor Timothy Mitchell

Monday/Wednesday: 10:10-11:25 AM

This course examines a set of questions that have shaped the study of the politics of the modern Middle East. It looks at the main ways those questions have been answered, exploring debates both in Western academic scholarship and among scholars and intellectuals in the region itself. For each question, the course offers new ways of thinking about the issue or ways of framing it in different terms. The topics covered in the course include: the kinds of modern state that emerged in the Middle East and the ways its forms of power and authority were shaped; the birth of economic development as a way of describing the function and measuring the success of the state, and the changing metrics of this success; the influence of oil on the politics of the region; the nature and role of Islamic political movements; the transformation of the countryside and the city and the role of rural populations and of urban protest in modern politics; and the politics of armed force and political violence in the region, and the ways in which this has been understood. The focus of the course will be on the politics of the twentieth century, but many topics will be traced back into developments that occurred in earlier periods, and several will be explored up to the present. The course is divided into four parts, each ending with a paper or exam in which participants are asked to analyze the material covered. Each part of the course has a geographical focus on a country or group of countries and a thematic focus on a particular set of questions of historical and political analysis.

URBAN SPACE & CONFLICT IN MIDDLE EAST

MDES UN3331, Professor Khatchig Mouradian

Monday: 4:10-6:00 PM

This course explores how civil war, revolution, militarization, mass violence, refugee crises, and terrorism impact urban spaces, and how city dwellers engage in urban resilience, negotiate and attempt to reclaim their right to the city. Through case studies of Beirut (1975-present), Baghdad (2003-present), Cairo (2011-present), Diyarbakir (1914-present), Aleppo (1914-present), and Jerusalem (1914-present), this course traces how urban life adjusted to destruction (and post-conflict reconstruction), violence, and anarchy; how neighborhoods were reshaped; and how local ethnic, religious, and political dynamics played out in these cities and metropolises. Relying on multi-disciplinary and post-disciplinary scholarship, and employing a wealth of audiovisual material, literary works, and interviews conducted by the instructor, the course

scrutinizes how conflicts have impacted urban life in the Middle East, and how civilians react to, confront, and resist militarization in urban spaces.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS IN ISLAMIC LAW

MDES UN3923, Professor Wael Hallaq

Tuesday: 4:10-6:00 PM

Through detailed discussions of certain landmarks in Islamic legal history (e.g. origins; early formation; sources of law; intellectual make-up; the workings of court; legal change; women in the law; legal effects of colonialism; modernity and legal reform, etc.), the course aims at providing an introductory but integrated view of Islamic law, a definition, so to speak, of what it was/is. Please note, this course must be taken for a letter grade.

HONORS THESIS SEMINAR PART II

MDES UN3961, Professor Debashree Mukherjee

Monday: 2:10-4:00 PM

The MESAAS honors seminar offers the opportunity to undertake a sustained research project working closely with an individual faculty adviser. It also enables you, as part of a small group of MESAAS students working with the seminar instructor, to develop the skills of academic research and writing and learn how to collaborate with peers and create an engaged intellectual community. This 3-point seminar continues the work begun in the Fall semester of the senior year in MDES 3960 Honors Thesis Seminar Part 1.

Locating Africa in the 20th Century World

MDES GU4052, Professor Jinny Prais

Tuesday: 12:10-2:00 PM

This seminar explores how African and diasporic thinkers, artists, and activists positioned Africa within the twentieth-century world. From imperial capitals to colonial port cities—from Harlem to Dakar and Accra—they engaged the languages of political modernity—citizenship, rights, equality, and justice—as sites of experimentation. The course traces how writers and intellectuals across Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas redefined modernity through Pan-Africanism, feminism, communism, Black internationalism, and anti-imperialism. Moving beyond British and French imperial frameworks, students examine trans-imperial and trans-oceanic exchanges that shaped African self-representation and analyze how Africa functioned—as concept and territory—within the making of the modern world.

Reading Marx Historically

MDES GU4060, Professor Sudipta Kaviraj

Thursday: 2:10-4:00 PM

The historical significance of Marx lies not only in his reception in Germany or Europe, but across the world. But Marx's thought emerged from a highly specific intellectual context of

European thought. Therefore, reading Marx must have a contextual, German and European side, and, equally, a global reception side. The purpose of this course will be to read Marx's texts closely, and to follow the trajectory of his ideas historically and therefore globally. In one sense, we understand what 'doing' political theory means more clearly in studying the struggles of Marx's readers in addressing the question: how can reading Marx illuminate the historical analysis of very different societies – societies which were not in Europe, societies which were not based on a capitalist economy, societies that were not yet 'modern' in their economy, politics and culture. A part of the course will be about the Marxism of the 'others': American Black thinkers, and thinkers in China, India, Africa, the Middle East. To follow Marx's thought historically is to read his thought globally.

MAJOR DEBATES IN THE STUDY OF AFRICA

MDES GU4160, Professor Mahmood Mamdani

Tuesday: 10:10 AM-12:00 PM

This course will focus on key debates that have shaped the study of Africa in the post-colonial African academy. We will cover six key debates: Historiography; Slavery: Premodern and Modern; State Formation; Colonialism and Difference; Nationalism; Political Identity and Political Violence. The approach will be multi-disciplinary. To the extent possible, readings will be illustrative of different sides in the debate.

Houses of Wisdom

CLME GU4211, Professor Elaine van Dalen

Monday: 12:10-2:00 PM

Teaching and learning in the premodern Islamic world centered around the person, rather than the space. Entries in medieval biographical dictionaries tend to emphasize a scholar's teachers, not the institutions they studied at. Nonetheless knowledge had a geography: it was embodied and situated. Where people studied, discussed, and taught determined how and what knowledge was gained and transmitted, and to whom. At the same time, different practices and values of knowledge transmission shaped spaces of scholarship.

This class will question the interplay between knowledge and space. We will focus on social and material dimensions of spaces, revealing connections and separations between scholars and disciplines as we attempt to materialize intellectual history. We will interrogate the boundaries between the informal and formal, personal and institutional, public and private, and use these categories to analyze the teaching and transmission of various kinds of knowledge, such as Islamic and Ancient sciences. Drawing from biographical dictionaries, literary works, documentary and archeological evidence, we will explore the importance of religious endowments and patronage, and examine access to scholarly spaces for the elite, the 'sub-elite' and the 'common' people. Finally, this class will confront enduring myths, such as those surrounding Baghdad's Bayt al-Hikma, and the Jundishāpūr hospital, and narratives surrounding the place of the natural sciences within the Islamic world.

The Arabic Linguistic Tradition

MDES GU4220, Professor May Ahmar

Thursday: 12:10-2:00 PM

The purpose of the Arabic Linguistic Tradition course is to introduce undergraduate and graduate students to the Arabic Linguistic Tradition, starting before Islam and ending in current times.

The course maps out the context in which the Arabic language and its predecessors existed, the history of the development of the language, its script, its geographical spread, its linguistic influences on other languages and scripts throughout the world, as well as its own influences by other languages. The course will also examine the importance of Arabic as a language of religion, philosophy, sciences, and nationalism. Furthermore, the course will focus on the classical Arabic linguistic categories and fields devised by Arab/Arabic grammarians, and how we can situate them vis-à-vis modern western linguistic theories. The course will detail some of the language linguistic issues, challenges and secrets, as the language stands on its own, as well as within a euro-centric “modern” linguistic theories framework.

Beyond Human in Modern Hebrew Literature

MDES GU4532, Professor Naama Harel

Wednesday: 2:10-4:00 PM

“The possibility of pogroms,” claims Theodor Adorno, “is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze—’after all it’s only an animal’—reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings.”

This course traces the development of Modern Hebrew literature, from its fin-de-siècle revival to contemporary Israeli fiction, through the prism of animality and animalization. We will focus on human-animal relations and animalization/dehumanization of humans in literary works by prominent Hebrew authors, including M.Y. Berdichevsky, Devorah Baron, S.Y. Agnon, Amos Oz, David Grossman, Orly Castel-Bloom, Almog Behar, Etgar Keret, and Sayed Kashua.

Employing posthumanist and ecofeminist theoretical lenses, we will analyze the bio-political intersections of species and gender, as well as animalization as a process of otherization of marginalized ethnic groups. Throughout the course, we will ask questions, such as: why animals abound in Modern Hebrew literature? Are they merely metaphors for intra-human issues, or rather count as subjects? What literary devices are used to portray animals? How has the depiction of human-animal relations changed in Hebrew over the last 150 years? How do cultural and political frameworks inform representations of human-animal relations? No prior knowledge of Hebrew is required; all readings and class discussions will be in English. Course participants with reading knowledge of Hebrew are encouraged to consult the original literary texts, provided by the instructor upon request.

Readings in Hindi Lit I

MDES GU4610, Professor Timsal Masud

Tuesday/Thursday: 12:10-2:00 PM

Sound and Listening Cultures of the Indian Subcontinent

MDES GR4634, Professor Isabel Huacuja Alonso

Tuesday: 2:10-4:00 PM

This course will explore major themes in the growing field of Sound Studies with a focus on the rich history of sound and varied cultures of sound and listening in the Indian subcontinent. The main questions that we will address include: how have political, commercial, and cultural movements shaped *what* the diverse populations of South Asia listen to and *how* they listen? How have different forms of media shaped/ informed listening experiences in South Asia? How do listening practices and cultures from the subcontinent differ from those in other regions? In this class we will listen to the human voice, rumor/gossip, gramophone, loud speakers, radio, film, and mp3. We will discuss the role political speeches, film songs, and devotional songs in shaping South Asian politics and culture in the twentieth-century as the subcontinent transitioned from colonial rule to nation-states. Drawing on the interdisciplinary nature of Sound Studies, we will read works from across the disciplines—anthropology, ethnomusicology, Religious Studies, Media Studies, and history. Organized thematically, this course will focus on the twentieth century, but the readings will address earlier time periods.

This is an upper-level undergraduate and graduate (MA) seminar. Students are expected to have some background in South Asian studies/history or media/sounds studies. The class will meet once a week for discussion of readings. In addition to readings there will be several required film screenings or listening activities.

Readings in Urdu Lit

MDES GU4636, Professor Aftab Ahmad

Tuesday/Thursday: 6:10-8:00 PM

Two semesters of prior coursework in Urdu for Heritage Speakers (Urdu for Heritage Speakers I and II) or one semester of Advanced Urdu or the instructor's permission. This course is a literary course, with in-depth exposure to some of the finest works of classical and modern Urdu poetry i.e. genres of ghazal and nazm. This course is open for both undergraduates and graduates. No P/D/F or R credit is allowed for this class.

India after 1947: Democracy and Majoritarianism

MDES GR4655, Professor Isabel Huacuja Alonso

Wednesday: 2:10-4:00 PM

This course will explore recent histories of post-independence India, focusing on the first three decades of independence (1947-1977) following the end of British colonial rule. Until rather recently, most histories of South Asia concluded with independence, casting, perhaps unconsciously, the end of British rule as the end of history in the region. However, in recent years, we have witnessed a boom of historical writing on post-independence India. In this class, we will analyze this emerging scholarship and focus on the themes of democracy and majoritarianism. We will read about the establishment of universal franchise in 1950s India, the writing and implementation of the constitution, and the country's experiments with various

economic plans. At the same time, we will study the Indian state's often violent integration of regions originally outside Britain's direct domain, including the princely states of Kashmir and Hyderabad, and the development of what scholars have described as new forms of colonialism in the region after 1947. Likewise, we will study the growth of majoritarian ideologies and the continued struggle against caste oppression, all while considering India's place in the larger Cold War. Throughout the class, we will remain attendant to aesthetic developments in media and literature during this period. While the course focuses on India—or more specifically on various communities' interactions with the Indian state—we will also study developments in Pakistan (and Bangladesh after 1971) and other neighboring states, recognizing that their shared histories did not end with Partition.

READINGS IN PERSIAN TEXTS

MDES GU4726, Professor Mana Kia

Tuesday/Thursday: 10:10 AM-12:00 PM

May be repeated for credit; content varies.

Prerequisites: Must have completed MDES 2702, equivalent two years of Persian or the instructor's permission.

This course provides experience reading and analyzing Persian language texts, as well as translating them into English. We will also spend some time learning how to read different kinds of paleography, and about various manuscript and print conventions and practices.

Supplementary scholarly readings in English will situate the Persian texts. There will be a translation workshop at the end of the semester with related texts of the students choosing, in preparation for a final translation project. No P/D/F or R credit is allowed for this class.

THEORY AND METHODS II

MDES GR5001, Professor Sudipta Kaviraj

Wednesday: 4:10-6:00 PM

This course will be the first part of a two part introduction to theoretical approaches to modern social science and cultural studies in Asian and African contexts. The first course will focus primarily on methodological and theoretical problems in the fields broadly described as historical social sciences - which study historical trends, and political, economic and social institutions and processes. The course will start with discussions regarding the origins of the modern social sciences and the disputes about the nature of social science knowledge. In the next section it will focus on definitions and debates about the concept of modernity. It will go on to analyses of some fundamental concepts used in modern social and historical analyses: concepts of social action, political concepts like state, power, hegemony, democracy, nationalism; economic concepts like the economy, labor, market, capitalism, and related concepts of

secularity/secularism, representation, and identity. The teaching will be primarily through close reading of set texts, followed by a discussion. A primary concern of the course will be to think about problems specific to the societies studied by scholars of Asia and Africa: how to use a conceptual language originally stemming from reflection on European modernity in thinking about societies which have quite different historical and cultural characteristics.

MESAAS RESEARCH COLLOQUIUM

MDES GR6008, Alison Vacca

Thursday: 4:10-6:00 PM

This course provides a structured setting for stand-alone M.A. students in their final year and Ph.D. students in their second and third years to develop their research trajectories in a way that complements normal coursework. The seminar meets approximately biweekly and focuses on topics such as research methodology; project design; literature review, including bibliographies and citation practices; grant writing. Required for MESAAS graduate students in their second and third year.

COLONIALISM

MDES GR6020, Professor Timothy Mitchell

Monday: 4:10-6:00 PM

The seminar on Colonialism examines questions of political economy and politics through the study of colonial regimes of power and knowledge. It has a particular focus on the genealogy of the business corporation, a colonial form of power that became central to the modern world but often escapes the attention of critical political theory. The readings cover the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, across the period from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. The seminar is intended primarily for Ph.D. students interested in interdisciplinary approaches to the study of politics, political economy, and colonial history. For course requirements and other information, see CourseWorks.

NATIONALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST AS IDEA AND PRACTICE

MDES GR6031, Professor Joseph Massad

Tuesday: 4:10-6:00 PM

Intends to familiarize students with the most recent theories dealing with nationalism from a variety of angles and perspectives.

DISSERTATION COLLOQUIUM

MDES GR8008, Professor Gil Hochberg

The dissertation colloquium is a non-credit course open to MESAAS doctoral students who have completed the M.Phil. degree. It provides a forum in which the entire community of dissertation writers meets, bridging the departments' different fields and regions of research. It complements workshops outside the department focused on one area or theme. Through an encounter with the diversity of research underway in MESAAS, participants learn to engage with work anchored in

different regions and disciplines and discover or develop what is common in the departments post-disciplinary methods of inquiry. Since the community is relatively small, it is expected that all post-M.Phil. students in residence will join the colloquium. Post M.Phil. Students from other departments may request permission to join the colloquium, but places for non-MESAAS students will be limited. The colloquium convenes every semester, meeting once every two weeks. Each meeting is devoted to the discussion of one or two pre-circulated pieces of work (a draft prospectus or dissertation chapter). Every participant contributes at least one piece of work each year.

Language Courses

MDES UN1210, First Year Arabic I
MDES UN1211, First Year Arabic II
MDES UN2201, Second Year Arabic I
MDES UN2202, Second Year Arabic II
MDES UN 2209, Arabic Heritage Speakers II
MDES GU4211, Third Year Arabic II
MDES GU4213, Fourth Year Modern Arabic II
MDES GU4216, Advanced Arabic Grammar Review

MDES UN1501, First Year Hebrew I
MDES UN1502, First Year Hebrew II
MDES UN2518, Hebrew Heritage Speakers II
MDES UN2501, Second Year Hebrew I
MDES UN2502, Second Year Hebrew II

MDES UN1602, Elementary Hindi-Urdu II
MDES UN1609, Hindi for Heritage Speakers II
MDES UN1615, Urdu for Heritage Speakers II
MDES UN2602, Intermediate Hindi-Urdu II
MDES GU4625, Advanced Hindi II

MDES UN1702, Elementary Persian II
MDES UN2702, Intermediate Persian II

MDES GU4711, Advanced Persian II

MDES UN402, Elementary Sanskrit II

MDES UN2402, Intermediate Sanskrit II

SWHL UN1102, Elementary Swahili II

SWHL UN2102, Intermediate Swahili II

SWHL UN3302, Advanced Swahili II

MDES UN2102, Intermediate Tamil II

MDES UN1902, Elementary Turkish II

MDES UN2902, Intermediate Turkish II

MDES GU4912, Advanced Turkish II

WLOF UN1102, Elementary Wolof II

WLOF UN2102, Intermediate Wolof II

WLOF UN3302, Advanced Wolof II