Originally used by indigenous peoples in Amazonia, with the advent of European explorers and scientists, seeds of the rubber tree reached royal botanical gardens in Europe and, later, in massive amounts Southeast Asia’s plantations, controlled by non-Hispanic imperial powers. It was the expansion of the bicycle, car, and airplane industries that led to the ever growing demand for rubber in the centers of power, but not only. Can you imagine today’s production, distribution, and consumption worlds without rubber or it’s – not quite as perfect – synthetic equivalent? Rubber lay at the heart of what has been called the “unequal worldwide distribution of labor,” and its concomitant power struggles on a worldwide scale.

Course:

Week 1
- Economic History, Historiography, and Natural Resources

Week 2
- Discoveries in the Era of Enlightenment
  - Anthony Smith, Explorers of the Amazon (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 1994, pp. 189-250 (Monsieur and Madame Godin, Baron von Humboldt)

Week 3
- Crop Diversity in the New World

Week 4
- Markets and Commodity Chains

Week 5
- A Brief History of Rubber, Brazil

Week 6
- Rubber Barons
  Anthony Smith (s.a.a.) pp. 285-324 (Julio Arana, King of the Putumayo), Film: Fitzcarraldo by Werner Herzog
Week 7
- Fordlandia
Greg Grandin, Fordlandia. The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City (New York:Henry Holt and Company), 2009 (read as much as your time allows, reads like a novel, and tells much about industrial push in the U.S.)

Week 8
- Borders and Progress

Week 9
- Rubber Dependency
In Ibid, pp. 49-85

Week 10
- Love, War, and Labor: From Wartime Soldiers to Green Guerrillas
In Ibid. pp. 86-169, and pp. 213-228

Evaluation:
- As we read our way through many aspects of rubber production, distribution, consumption, I want you to select one of these aspects (from politics, wars, borders, migration, indigeneity, labor, environment, industry to expressions of art, in film, music, paintings, etc.) to turn it into a final research paper (ca. 10 pp.). 65%
- Instead of a mid-term, you will finish a research proposal with an annotated bibliography by the end of week 5. 35%
- Highly recommended: begin with your research early in the Quarter

The few books and articles indicated in the Readings each week are easy to access and can also be bought used in “very good conditions.” Ideally you should come to class having read and taken notes of the weekly readings. Weeks 4 and 10 consider the largest portions of your weekly readings. Make sure you plan your time well.