Where does power originate, and how does it operate in imperial states? The relationships between individuals, states, and capital are by no means settled, particularly with regard to the nineteenth century. In the Middle Eastern context, questions about the operation of power in the late Ottoman Empire are bound up with issues of imperial decline and European domination. Many scholars of the Ottoman Empire have embraced a center-periphery model in which political and intellectual authority primarily emanated from Istanbul to the provinces. Other scholars have focused on the economic and political ruptures produced by the incursions of European capital and states in the Ottoman domains. However, scholars have not addressed the dynamics – and opportunities – created in areas where Ottoman authority overlapped with other imperial structures. Moreover, there has been little recognition that the Ottoman Empire experienced an antebellum “Gilded Age” explosion of wealth akin to that in the United States.

As a result, our understanding of the dynamics of capital and power in the late Ottoman Empire has remained centered on European capital and imperialism, particularly in thinking about the periphery. “Internal” accounts of the Ottoman polity, on the other hand, have focused on political and administrative dynamics. Both kinds of analysis privilege metropolitan actors. Without an adequate understanding of how political and economic power was acquired and wielded by “peripheral” actors, however, we are left without a satisfying explanation of how the empire worked as a whole. My dissertation, “Empire on Edge: Land, Law, and Capital in Gilded Age Basra,” fills this gap through an analaysis of local magnates and their manipulation of the edges between different political formations, modes of cultural legitimacy, legal and bureaucratic regimes, and ecological zones. Through an examination of conflicts over land, I argue that these men used cultural, political, and environmental resources to accumulate capital in the context of changing Ottoman legal and administrative regimes under threat of European imperialism. Their control of resources, and how they achieved it, both followed and constructed new geographies of accumulation, as well as influencing local and imperial political cultures and shaping the balance of economic and political power in post-Ottoman Iraq.

Basra, in what is now southern Iraq, was by the late nineteenth century an unquestioned part of the Ottoman Empire, governed by Ottoman laws and officials. The city, less than twenty miles from the Iranian border, was also an important site for British and especially British Indian diplomats and capital hoping to extend British dominance over the Gulf up the Tigris and Euphrates. On the other hand, as the most important commercial port on the Gulf, and the southernmost area of Ottoman control in the region, Basra also played a major role in Ottoman attempts to re-assert influence over the Arab principalities in the region. These attempts were grounded first in changes to Ottoman governance within the province, which included changes to the management of land. At the same time, scholars have shown that Basra continued to operate both economically and politically within a broader sphere encompassing southern Iran, parts of the Arabian peninsula, and Kuwait, though these networks were affected by the solification of international borders and the tightening of state controls.

For the notables of Basra, many of whom were landed date merchants, tribal shaykhs, or both, the creation of new bureaucratic instruments and administrative bodies to oversee and implement both the 1858 Land Law (partially) and a renewed system of tax-farmed agricultural tithes, offered both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities to increase and consolidate political and economic resources. These opportunities were further shaped by the proximity of the international border with Iran and the political possibilities offered by the local representatives of the British Raj. Notables worked within the contours of Ottoman state administration but also outside and across it, enacting and (at times) actively advocating for novel geographic and conceptual formulations of empire, in relation to other modes of political and cultural belonging. The “empires” of the men I study were rooted in different ways in the land, especially date groves on the Shatt al-‘Arab river from the Gulf to Qurna, north of Basra, and rice lands between Qurna and ‘Amara on the Tigris. The extraordinary agricultural wealth of Basra province was rooted in the water-rich rice and date lands adjacent to the marshlands, then the largest in the world. Dates in particular were not only the largest export commodity from Iraq, but also provided over 80% of the world’s crop through the early twentieth century.

While work on Ottoman Iraq has often focused on Baghdad, a few scholars have tackled the history of Basra. Using Arabic chronicles and British sources, Hala Fattah has argued that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Basra formed part of a larger regional trade network anchored by free-trade ports and interior cities, though she contends this was dismantled by increasing British commercial penetration by the beginning of the twentieth century. Burcu Kurt, relying largely on Ottoman government records, endorses a more classic center-periphery argument about Basra under the Committee of Union and Progress (the Young Turks), between 1908 and 1914. She argues that the political and social dynamics of Basra in this period were determined by the reactions of local notables to the dictates and desires of the central Ottoman state. Talib al-Gharib, on the other hand, has used local court records to argue that economic and social power in nineteenth-century Basra were rooted in the commodification of land after the opening of the Suez Canal through the breaking up of estates accumulated through prior service to Ottoman authorities. Partly because of their reliance on almost entirely separate bodies of sources, these works offer quite divergent depictions of economic and social life in nineteenth-century Basra, in addition to portraying state, society, and economy as discrete objects of analysis.

Scholars working on other parts of the Ottoman lands have studied center-periphery dynamics, at times in conjunction with the dynamics of European capital. Works like Dina Khoury’s *State and Provincial Society*, and more recenty, Nora Barakat’s “An Empty Land?” address what it meant to be Ottoman in the periphery. Beshara Doumani’s work on Palestine and Jens Hanssen’s work on Beirut have demonstrated how the incorporation of parts of the Ottoman Empire into the world economy was focused and given meaning by the structures of local government and society. Nearby, Fahad Ahmad Bishara’s *A Sea of Debt* argues that debt and other obligations connected individuals and communities across the Indian Ocean and the Gulf, and that imperial legal and administrative geographies were shaped and even determined by these relationships. Building on this scholarship, my dissertation focuses on land as an integral part of Ottoman administration and local capital networks, which were also intertwined. In attending to the specific geographies within which different capitalists moved, and in focusing on local rather than European capital, my work offers an alternative to the province-Istanbul-Europe triangle that characterizes much work on the so-called periphery.

My dissertation focuses on five men, and on five modes of negotiating the edges which characterized the material and cultural life of nineteenth-century Basra. While their situations and approaches to land, law, and capital differed quite widely, I use this variety to argue that we ought to conceive of the Gilded Age as a global phenomenon, in terms of increasingly unequal accumulation, new ways to display consumption, and in some cases associated political ideas. The first chapter uses the experience of Züheyrzade Ahmed to argue that *tapu sened*s and committees as new administrative tools to regulate landed property helped produce fraud as a mode of governance. *Tanzimat*-era institutions constituted the “economic” and “political” as separate realms, creating unsustainable paradoxes as these institutions relied on the mixed economic-social-political power of notables while refusing its legitimacy. These paradoxes caused Ahmed’s permanent exile to Istanbul, where he sought to mobilize new administrative tools to bypass these dynamics. His attempts to secure concession funding outline a localist affective and economic geography to which Basra was central, but which embraced a diffuse empire-wide spatiality. Subsequently, his attempt to fraudulently register most of Basra province as his personal property depended on both the existence and the perception of knowledge asymmetries, sending the Porte and the *defter-i hakani* into an anxiety spiral over the possibility of adjudicating his crimes. This pushed them to embrace even more the documents and committees which underpinned Ahmed’s crimes, demonstrating how fraud, and the fear of fraud, fueled the expansion of modern governance.

The next two chapters focus on the tax farming system which dominated both the *seniye* and *mülkiye* rice-lands of ‘Amara. Chapter two looks at how tax-farmers and their guarantors used the changing legal framework of tax-farming to accumulate economic and political capital. The (largely overlooked) centrality of tax-farmed revenues to late Ottoman finance, and to underwriting Ottoman foreign borrowing, led lawmakers to require securitized guarantees from tax farmers, creating a system of land and revenue management which integrated state and private ownership. In ‘Amara, grain merchants like ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Khudayri used different modes of guarantees to invest in tax farms through modified futures contracts, which they used to gain control of local grain harvests. Al-Khudayri’s simultaneous investment in the illegal arms trade helped fuel the increasing militarization of local politics, and, especially, of the competition over tax farms. At the same time, tax farmers like ‘Araybi al-Wadi (who had a long on-off financial relationship with ‘Abd al-Qadir), as well as local council members, used tax-farm disputes to advance a vision of the Ottoman political and economic collective constituted by regulatory and administrative justice. Chapter three remains with the ‘Amara tax farmers, focusing on shaykh Ghadban of the Bani Lam to argue that local use of particular legal discourses tied to tax farming shaped bureaucratic understandings of local society and approaches to land settlement and distribution. In particular, accusations by and against Ghadban of using “borrowed names” to fraudulently acquire tax farms permeated bureaucratic understandings of identity and legitimacy. These allegations, alongside charges of “banditry” and “corruption,” must be understood in a trans-border context, as Ghadban (and others) attempted to return to ‘Amara after years in nearby exile in Iran, helping to create political-economic turmoil in areas long since resettled by other groups. Together, these two chapters offer a new understanding of how political-economic, bureaucratic, and legal formations were mutually constituted in late Ottoman Iraq.

The last two chapters focus on the Shatt al-‘Arab date plantations belonging to shaykh Mubarak of Kuwait and shaykh Khaz‘al of Muhammera. Chapter 4 focuses on Mubarak to show how the emergence of nationality as a tool of Ottoman and international administration was linked to transformations of the late Ottoman property regime. This process was contested and negotiated with norms around gender and the dynastic family, as well as the tensions of inter-imperial (Ottoman-British) competition. Through the resolution of intra-family conflict over the estates on the Fau peninsula, Ottoman property law was accommodated to the Al Sabah approach to land as a way to maintain the dynastic family. Mubarak’s subsequent use of rhetorical and material artifacts to claim the land as private property put him in conflict with Ottoman military authorities over the relationship between the sovereignty of private property owners and imperial sovereignty. When he was prevented from purchasing more land, Mubarak further contested the Ottoman move to link land ownership to nationality by articulating an alternate concept of imperial sovereignty as a contingent relationship constituted through service. Mubarak was able to articulate this implictly spatial imperial idea because his refusal of nationality and multiple imperial and local alliances created edge effects centered on his person.

The final chapter explores the multiple intellectual and legal spatialities produced by shaykh Khaz‘al of Muhammara’s land accumulation on both sides of the Ottoman-Qajar border. Khaz‘al embraced his Qajar status to solidify his claim to title in two increasingly separate estates. Despite his best efforts, he was never able to really transcend the ecological connectedness of the Shatt al-‘Arab region. The wealth produced by these estates allowed Khaz‘al to anchor a social-political scene for the notables of Basra at his Shatt al-‘Arab palace, based in ostentatious consumption practices and aimed at constituting a loose federation of emirates across the northern Gulf under reimagined Ottoman suzerainty. This network and Khaz‘al’s opulent lifestyle also served as the basis for the *nahda* imaginings of ‘Abd al-Masih Antaki, a Syrian-Egyptian journalist. He argued in the pages of his weekly magazine and in multiple large volumes and praise poems that Khaz‘al and Mubarak represented the best hope for the Arab-Ottoman future, as progressive princes who nonetheless embraced the Arab-Islamic monarchic tradition. Conceiving of the Ottoman Empire primarily as caliphate, Antaki, probably with Khaz‘al’s approval, positioned the shaykh as the ideal figure to lead a relocated and reconceived Arab-Ottoman renaissance. Here, the Ottoman-Qajar border helped constitute an edge zone which Khaz‘al used to imagine a wide variety of geographical and ideological futures for Basra and Khuzestan as part of a reimagined and recentered Ottoman sovereignty.

My dissertation is based primarily on a year of archival work conducted at the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi and other collections in Istanbul, as well as a semester of archival work at several archives in the UK, and private collections in Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. My dissertation also incorporates published sources, largely local chronicles in Arabic and travel narratives in Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and English. I have drafted four of the chapters (all but chapter 3). Mostly recently, I finished drafting chapter 2, which is what I hope (primarily) to discuss with you here. I am interested, in this chapter, in how the Tithe Regulations – as opposed to the better-studied 1858 Land Law – functioned as an “idiom” of governance/modernity, which created new and different opportunities for capitalists. I am having some trouble with the apparent disconnection between the political and economic phenomena enabled by the regulations, and I would also like advice about (1) meaningfully incorporating the wealth of quantitative data I have collected on this issue and (2) thinking about how to situate this kind of capitalism in the (which?) literature as – what seems to me – to be an advanced speculative agrarian economy in which land remains largely un-commoditized.

“Empire on Edge” argues that a new idiom of Ottoman governance, constructed through the implementation of novel legal categories and bureaucratic instruments, created opportunities for the emergence of fraud, theft, and capital accumulation as significant features of modern administration, but also contributed to new possible imaginings of Ottoman futures. This administrative idiom was not unique to Basra. However, the specific ways it was contested and its ultimate shape depended on a particular constellation of interests, entanglements, and local ecologies. Those entanglements and contestations shaped how the Ottoman present and future could be imagined. At the same time, embodied and imagined Ottoman geographies encompassed the whole empire, reminding us that the tools and categories which comprised the idiom of rule were shared with the rest of the Ottoman lands. Understanding its components and how it was experienced is necessary to reconceptualizing the Ottoman modern.