

Material+Visual Worlds
Transdisciplinary Area of Excellence
2025 Fall Semester

presents

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**Rot: Appetite and Political Economy
in Ireland before the Famine**

Thursday 9 October

6:00 P.M.

Academic Building A 340

On the eve of the Great Famine (1845-1851), British commentators speculated about the apparently limitless, even freakish appetites of the poorest Irish rural laborers for potatoes. Potatoes were more than a staple for the Irish poor; millions subsisted on potatoes, and virtually nothing else. To many officials and political economists, this total dependence on potatoes symbolized Ireland's antiquity. The Irish, by these lights, were an atavism in the modern United Kingdom, a people from another time who needed to be brought into the economic present, through land reform, labor discipline, and the dynamic energy of English capital. In reality, the potato made possible an endless squeeze on Irish laborers to produce crops for export, mostly to England and Scotland. Rather than insulating Ireland from the risks of nineteenth-century global capitalism, the potato economy left the very poorest workers in the United Kingdom exquisitely vulnerable to the perils of the market.

Image: A potato shows signs of the disease called blight. Nigel Cattin/Alamy