The presentation will focus upon the administrative and political crisis in the princely state of Gwalior (now a district in the present-day state of Madhya Pradesh) in the late 19th- mid 20th century. Gwalior was one of the nearly 600 princely states that were brought under a system of ‘indirect rule’ by the British in 1818, with the Scindia family ruling it since the 18th century. The British colonial government had put constraints on the political and economic choices of Scindias and frequently intervened in their internal affairs through political officers who were posted in Gwalior durbar (court). Further, the administrative and political structure of Gwalior was based upon the patrimonial system. It implied a type of authority where the administrative officials were responsible to the ruler personally.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British intervention in the administration of Gwalior disturbed the traditional political culture which stimulated a bureaucratic and political crisis in the state. When the British tried to replace the patrimonial system with a ‘modern’ bureaucratic structure during this period, it entailed uprooting the entire set of ideas and norms which had hitherto sustained the political order in Gwalior. As the ruling Scindia and traditional aristocracy strove to retain their influence and authority in the state administration, the clash between two value systems, one based on personal rights and another objective norm, became inevitable. The aim of this presentation thus, is two-fold – first, to analyse the crisis of patrimonial bureaucracy in Gwalior; and second, to explain how the persistence of patrimonial features in the post-colonial Indian administrative structure lies at the heart of the ongoing crisis of bureaucratic and democratic institutions in India.

Pablo Seward Delaporte is a sixth-year Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. His dissertation project concerns the politics of risk, security, and violence around state efforts to re-settle predominantly Black and Indigenous Latin American migrants living in high-risk self-built settlements in Antofagasta, Chile. In addition to writing his dissertation, Pablo is currently participating in an NSF-funded multi-country study that examines the effects of COVID-19-related state policies on vulnerable families’ finances, illness trajectories and management, everyday lives, and intimate relationships.