

EXCEPTIONALISM IN EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Symposium at the GHI, October 10, 2002. Convener: Christof Mauch (GHI). Participants: Joachim Radkau (University of Bielefeld), John McNeill (Georgetown University).

Over the last few years, the German Historical Institute has sought to enhance the dialogue between environmental historians on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1999, the GHI organized a lecture series on "Nature in German History," and in 2000, a conference was held in Tallahassee, Florida, on the topic of "Environmentalism in Global Perspective." The symposium in October 2002 brought together two outstanding scholars from Germany and America in the field of global environmental history, Joachim Radkau and John McNeill. The event also served as the opening event for an international conference on "Landscapes and Roads in Europe and America," which started the following day.

In his paper, Radkau argued that Western and Central Europe could be considered as an environmental unit since medieval times in several important respects. He noted, however, that religion would be at the center of a distinctive European path, and he pleaded for an institutional approach to environmental history. According to Radkau, one would be most likely to identify a characteristic European path of environmental history not in the sphere of ideas and individual actions, but on the level of institutions and collective behavior. He argued that European polycentrism had produced diverse approaches, which proved to be an advantage for effective environmental management. Nevertheless, environmental history was not a "European miracle" (Eric L. Jones). Instead, western civilizations should learn lessons from Chinese environmental history, where, for a long time, a high degree of sustainability existed, which partly explained Chinese cultural continuity over the millennia.

In his reply, John McNeill agreed with the general argument that Radkau had presented, but challenged many individual points. After a discussion with the audience, McNeill praised the boldness of Radkau's undertaking and suggested that the German Historical Institute would do well to bring Radkau's work to the widest possible audience. The next issue of the *Bulletin* will feature Joachim Radkau's paper and John McNeill's response.

Christof Mauch