

TURNING POINTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Conference at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies (ZiF) at Bielefeld University, June 16–18, 2005. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies. Organizers: Christof Mauch (GHI Washington), Joachim Radkau (Bielefeld University), and Frank Uekötter (Bielefeld University)

List of Participants: Werner Abelschäuser (University of Bielefeld), Alla Bolotova (European University, St. Petersburg), Stefan Brakensiek (University of Bielefeld), Franz-Josef Brüggemeier (University of Freiburg), Jens Ivo Engels (University of Freiburg), Deborah Fitzgerald (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Bernd-Stefan Grewe (University of Constance), Richard H. Grove (University of Sussex), Thomas Lekan (University of South Carolina), Carmit Lubanov (Tel Aviv University), John McNeill (Georgetown University), Christian Pfister (University of Bern), Thomas Potthast (University of Tübingen), Friedemann Schmoll (University of Tübingen), Dieter Schott (Darmstadt Institute of Technology), Joel Tarr (Carnegie Mellon University), Fiona Watson (University of Stirling), Verena Winiwarter (IFF Vienna), Anna-Katharina Wöbse (Bielefeld University).

Usually, when one organizes a conference, one has a rough idea of the prospective result. For this conference, the starting point was different: it was a set of questions, along with a feeling that the question of general turning points in environmental history has somehow faded into the background. With the boom of research, environmental history has become more and more specialized, and the full breadth of its challenge for the historical profession has been somewhat lost. It is clear that historians cannot define turning points as easily today as could the first generation of environmental historians, where turning points simply marked the shift from an “ecologically benign” lifestyle to a “destructive” or “environmentally unsustainable” one. There seems to be near-unanimous agreement currently that it is fruitless to search for these “points of no return,” and that the periodization of environmental history will need to be more complex. But in what ways?

The conference sought to address this issue through a discussion of major topics of environmental history research. The speakers were asked to discuss turning points in broadly conceived fields like agriculture, forest history, and urban environmental history. In each case, the speakers were urged to concentrate on the same guiding questions: What are the major turning points in the respective fields, and what are the criteria for your judgment? The idea was that a combination of these perspectives would provide a path toward a discussion of the general questions un-

derlying the conference: What were the major turning points in the general history of man and the natural world? What are the criteria that historians should use in the periodization of environmental history? And how do the turning points of environmental history relate to the turning points of general history? Does environmental history demand a periodization of its own, or would it be wiser to adopt the turning points of general history?

It quickly became clear during the conference that turning points in environmental history are usually not momentary events. Joel Tarr mentioned the importance of specific events like the air pollution episodes in Donora and London or the toxic waste incidents at Love Canal and Times Beach, as did Joachim Radkau in his discussion of the "Atomic Age," and Deborah Fitzgerald stressed the importance of the two world wars in the history of agriculture as times of great innovation with light regulation. However, most of the turning points that speakers identified extended over long periods of time: Dieter Schott provided a fitting definition when he described turning points as "periods of accelerated and correlated change in different fields." It is not difficult to see that this is related to general characteristics of the field: with natural processes usually proceeding at a rather leisurely pace, environmental history deals with long-term processes. As a result, the search for sharp turning points often proved elusive: *natura non fecit saltus*—nature does not jump.

With the borders of environmental history being notoriously porous and open to change, the choice of topics proved particularly tricky. A number of papers focused on one of the three main fields of inquiry that John McNeill identified in a recent review essay: the material (soil, forests); the cultural/intellectual (biology, knowledge society); and the political (nation-state). Other papers covered all three of these fields (agriculture, urban environmental history) or focused on two time periods, the so-called Second Thirty Years' War (the years between 1914 and 1945) and the "Age of Ecology," in order to discuss their place in environmental history. Finally, two papers looked at Eastern Europe and the colonial world in order to inquire whether the environmental history of these areas requires a different periodization. Also, these two papers provided a helpful reminder that the conference, in spite of its thematic breadth, mostly focused on Western societies since 1500.

Among the diverse set of themes that environmental historians have covered, one has been particularly ripe for the definition of turning points: energy. In fact, Rolf Peter Sieferle even developed a periodization of world history based solely on the dominant modes of energy use. Christian Pfister's paper on the 1950s syndrome echoed this preference with his strong emphasis on the relative decline of energy prices in the postwar decades. Pfister pointed out that economic growth and energy

consumption were closely related, demonstrating the crucial role of energy for an environmental history of the postwar years. However, his narrow focus on energy drew criticism from Joachim Radkau in his keynote speech, where he argued for a broader perspective. In Radkau's presentation, the rise of energy consumption appeared less as a trend in its own right than a consequence of the globalization of an "American way of life"; with that, Radkau stressed the demand side where Pfister had pointed to the supply side. More generally, Radkau proposed to look not only at changes in the environment but also at turning points in human nature, in patterns of behavior that are rooted deeply in the human condition. While this "human nature" may be semiconscious at best, Radkau argued that it had an enormous environmental impact; examples ranged from the habit of a daily shower to the global mobility that low-cost air travel permits.

Does the environmental history of agriculture demand a periodization that differs from that of urban environmental history? The conference proceedings indicate that the answer may be a cautious yes. While the late nineteenth century emerged as a crucial time of change in the urban environment, the turning points in agriculture were both earlier and later. Deborah Fitzgerald saw a first wave of change in agriculture roughly between 1750 and 1850, with a growing emphasis on livestock and more productive crop rotation. While Fitzgerald depicts the second half of the nineteenth century also as a time of change, with soil science, mechanization, and Mendelism as the key innovations, this change does not look as dramatic as that in contemporary urban society. The industrialization of agriculture was lagging significantly behind the industrialization of cities, in spite of the close links between the two processes. According to Fitzgerald, the total industrialization of agriculture is a process that began after World War II—yet another argument for a broad conception of the "1950s syndrome."

Fitzgerald's paper found an interesting complement in Stefan Brakensiek's discussion of the commons. Agricultural reformers in the late eighteenth century were unanimous in their complaints over the mismanagement of the commons, a stance that clearly goes along with Garrett Hardin's famous argument of a "tragedy of the commons." But Brakensiek urged a closer look: In the region around Bielefeld, the dissolution of the commons between 1770 and 1830 did not induce decisive changes in farming practice. Even more, it has proven impossible to link privatization of land with soil erosion. In the discussion, Brakensiek stressed the market, rather than land ownership, as the key agent of change; Joachim Radkau spoke of the "law of inertia ruling supreme in agriculture." Brakensiek suggested viewing nineteenth-century agricultural history as essentially a process of colonization, a theme that also figured prominently

in Alla Bolotova's paper on the conquest of the Soviet north. It was one of the unexpected results of the conference that the concept of colonization may be of greater importance in environmental history than many researchers have realized.

The turning points of agriculture bear some resemblance to the turning points in forest history, though Bernd-Stefan Grewe pointed out that the periodization of forest history is especially difficult due to the long-term impact of changes in forestry. For the early-modern era, Grewe argued that turning points depended strongly on local and regional conditions. The first, more general turning point was the link between statehood and forestry that evolved around 1800, but Grewe kept his distance from the traditional narrative that had the wise foresters saving the German forests from destruction; rather, state control over the forests merely opened the stage for a century of crisis. In the twentieth century, wood no longer had an uncontested position as a key resource, making the periodization of twentieth-century forest history especially difficult, if not impossible.

It has become fashionable in recent years to speak of an age of "classic modernity" spanning from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, but the conference showed that this periodization is clearly of only limited use in environmental history: Thomas Lekan's paper on the nation-state was the only one with even a vague resemblance to the periodization of "classic modernity." Drawing on James Scott's book *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, 1998), Lekan saw the roughly one hundred years between 1850 and 1945 as the era of utopian or authoritarian high modernism. Lekan's paper instigated a stimulated discussion that raised a number of important caveats. Discussants pointed out that Scott sees any state as authoritarian, regardless of whether it was a democracy or a dictatorship. And did the history of the interventionist nation-state really end in 1945, giving way to what Lekan called a "post-national era?" Finally, discussants stressed that Scott focuses only on one field of state activity, namely resource use and social engineering. But what about the state as an agent of control, possessing a monopoly on violence and the ability to impose limits on people's behavior, a function that is crucial in many fields of relevance for environmental history, from pollution control to nature protection? For these themes, it may be helpful to refer to Charles Maier's definition of an age of "territoriality" spanning from the second half of the nineteenth to the late twentieth century, a time when the centralized nation-state was able to wield a decisive influence within its boundaries. (Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History," *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 807-831). If this is true, the rise of environmentalism would look like an odd turn of events: Just at the time when environmental issues were climbing to the top of the political

agenda, the powerful nation-state that an effective environmental policy needs so dearly was eroding due to the process of globalization.

In chronological perspective, the conference identified two time periods where turning points in several fields overlapped: the time around 1900 and the postwar era. The former time period is characterized by the rise of urban industrial society and the ensuing environmental problems. Dieter Schott and Joel Tarr analyzed this set of problems and the first wave of responses, including transportation, water and wastewater, and energy systems. This reading was surprisingly consistent with Friedemann Schmoll's interpretation of the rise of nature protection, which Schmoll conceived as an agent of modernization. To be sure, reverence for nature was not new in itself; as Fiona Watson argued in her engaged presentation on the history of landscape perception in early modernity, the intellectuals of the Enlightenment were "not as arrogant as many think." With this background, the key innovation of conservationists around 1900 was to see nature as something that had to be defended against human civilization. However, while the turning point in terms of problem awareness was unmistakable around 1900, things were looking more ambivalent in terms of solution. Schmoll argued that the early nature protection movement was "much more important for the household of modern culture than for the household of nature." The ambivalence of late-nineteenth-century solutions in urban environmental history is a familiar theme since Joel Tarr's much-quoted book *The Search for the Ultimate Sink* (Akron, Ohio, 1996).

While the conference sought to focus on Western societies since 1500, the strong emphasis on the twentieth century proved a recurring feature in many papers. While a number of contributors make an effort to look beyond the nineteenth and twentieth century, Fiona Watson's paper was the only one to focus on the early modern era. This result clearly mirrored John McNeill's argument in his well-known *Something New under the Sun* (London, 2000) that the twentieth century was marked by a distinct environmental footprint: "The twentieth century was unusual for the intensity of change and the centrality of human effort in provoking it." But environmental issues were not a constant fixture in twentieth-century politics: as Frank Uekötter argued in his paper on the Second Thirty Years' War, the time period between 1914 and 1945 constituted something of a "Great Hiatus" where environmental issues played a rather marginal role and conservation movements were, with some exceptions, held at bay; the general picture was one of following pre-1914 trends in a more or less lukewarm way. However, this argument was challenged by Alla Bolotova, who argued that times of tumultuous change also offer unexpected chances for environmental initiatives, as the designation of numerous nature reserves during the collapse of communist rule in East-

ern Europe demonstrates. Both perspectives are not necessarily at odds; after all, bold initiatives usually follow a period of stagnation. The German conservation law of 1935, which ended two decades full of difficulties and disappointments for the conservation community, provides a case in point.

The second cluster of turning points were the postwar decades, where a number of important but conflicting trends overlapped: the rise of mass consumption, a new perception of environmental issues in the media, and the much-touted "ecological turn." The latter came across badly in Jens Ivo Engels's paper. Analyzing the state of the environment, environmental consciousness, and environmental protection practice, Engels argued that the 1970s constitute a turning point only concerning awareness and rhetoric. However, this skeptical conclusion drew criticism from numerous sides, which stressed the strengthening of environmental policy over recent decades; perhaps the most forceful argument came from Bolotova, who urged Engels to look at Russia for a truly unsuccessful environmental movement. But controversial as the discussion was, it also took place with remarkable moderation, and not the flaming rhetoric that Engels's argument would have evoked some ten years ago. The process of historicizing the environmental movement is clearly under way.

It was perhaps inevitable that some topics proved more difficult to integrate into a general picture than others. Though no environmental historian would doubt the importance of demography, it proved surprisingly difficult to relate the turning points in population history with that in other fields. Perhaps reflecting part of this problem, Carmit Lubanov's paper on the topic had to cover two stories, that of demographic theories and that of actual population growth. Both stories were linked in Thomas Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, but the subsequent development of demographic thought did not have a major impact on population figures. Likewise, Richard Grove's fascinating presentation on the impact of colonialism, discussed by the example of the tropical island of St. Helena, nourished the impression that the environmental history of colonialism is a chapter of its own. The transformation of the island's ecology was stunning, even more so since much of it was more of an incidental byproduct: the desertification of great parts of the island was to a large extent the result of the introduction of goats. The British interest in the island was mostly of a strategic kind, as the islands' cliffs made it a veritable fortress at sea.

All in all, the conference proved to be a workshop in the true sense of the word: a place where broad questions were raised and discussed and paths toward potential answers explored, knowing that the result would inevitably be much more complex than the "points of no return" that

environmental historians identified some two decades ago. As it turned out, the historical interest was matched by a political one: with the governing coalition of Social Democrats and the Green Party on its way out of office in Germany, and the conference coinciding with the defeat of the same coalition in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia after thirty-nine years of social democratic rule, the issue of turning points caught the interest of the media. And so it came that the author of this report, when interviewed by German public radio, was faced with the question whether we are currently witnessing the end of the “age of ecology.” Needless to say, the author expressed doubts about the death of environmentalism, and not only to avoid entering environmental history as “The Man Who Announced the End of the Ecological Era.” After all, if all has been said and done about the environment, then why did we have such a stimulating conference?

Frank Uekötter