

CONFERENCE REPORTS

CROSSING BOUNDARIES: INTERDISCIPLINARY ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Workshop at the GHI, August 10, 2005. Conveners: Dirk Schumann (GHI), Bernd Herrmann (University of Göttingen).

Participants: Wiebke Bebermeier (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Dorothee Brantz (GHI), Jörg Cortekar (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Anna-Sarah Hennig (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Richard Hölzl (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Kai Hünemörder (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Anne Klammt (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Uwe Lübken (GHI), Mathias Mutz (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Karen Oslund (GHI), Jens Potschka (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Susan Strasser (University of Delaware), Katharina Thom (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Cai-Olaf Wilgeroth (Göttingen Graduate Seminar), Steffi Windelen (Göttingen Graduate Seminar).

After a three-week “environmental history tour” of the United States, including stops at the University of Kansas in Lawrence and in Kansas City, Missouri, the Göttingen Graduate Seminar on Environmental History (*Graduiertenkolleg Interdisziplinäre Umweltgeschichte*) came to Washington, DC on August 10, 2005 for a one-day workshop with the environmental history fellows of the GHI. Dirk Schumann opened the workshop by outlining the general activities of the GHI, and Dorothee Brantz followed up by detailing the activities and projects within the institute’s focus on environmental history.

In the first session of the morning, the GHI’s current environmental history fellows, Dorothee Brantz, Karen Oslund, and Uwe Lübken, presented their research. Dorothee Brantz introduced her new research project on war and the environment in the twentieth century. After providing a quick overview of her entire project, which will cover trench warfare in World War I, the bombing of cities during World War II, jungle warfare in Vietnam, and the burning of oil fields in Iraq, she focused more specifically on the example of World War I trenches to explain how she plans to investigate the impact of environmental factors on both the strategic planning and everyday practice of warfare. Karen Oslund followed by explaining her research project on the environmental history of the North Atlantic, with a focus on the contemporary politics of whale hunting and whaling protection in the region. She explained how the North Atlantic

waters are subject to both local and international wildlife management, and how she plans to use conflicts between these two authorities as a way of understanding how disputes over nature protection in marginal and frontier environments are resolved. Finally, Uwe Lübken gave a brief account of his current research project on the history of river floods in Germany and the United States. Focusing on the history of the Rhine and the Ohio River from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, he is particularly interested in the increasing vulnerability of modern societies to natural forces. As he pointed out, the societal causes and effects of such events can only be understood if one looks not only at nature's threatening character but also at the vast economic potentials of rivers and their adjacent landscapes. Floodplains, for example, can thus be analyzed as contested spaces, as they are contested by human land-use practices as well as by natural processes.

In the second session of the morning, Susan Strasser gave a presentation entitled "Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash." This project, which builds on her previous work in business history, the history of everyday life, and environmental history, looks at a transition in the meaning of "trash" in the United States around the end of World War II. She argued that the expanded consumer markets and transportation networks for goods changed the classification of "trash" because objects considered "waste" in one part of the system became "resources" in another part of the system. The system of waste management thus moved from a "closed" to an "open" one.

In the afternoon, the third and fourth sessions were devoted to the projects of the Göttingen Graduate Seminar on Environmental History. Coordinator Kai Hünemörder described the nature and purpose of the program, which is organized into four large thematic fields and fourteen individual case studies. The seminar brings together thirteen doctoral students and one post-doc coordinator with different academic backgrounds and methodological approaches in order to explore the field of environmental history in a truly interdisciplinary fashion. One of the main goals of the project is to close the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities.

Project A analyzes the exploitation and experience of space and environment in the Middle Ages and focuses especially on the Slavic-Saxon borderlands (Jens Potschka, Cai-Olaf Wilgeroth, Anne Klammt). Project B deals with the "containment of nature" and looks at, among other things, pest control and river regulations (Katharina Thom, Wiebke Bebermeier). Project C deals with conflicts about natural resources from the eighteenth to the twentieth century and examines in particular the use of natural resources in the German paper industry (Mathias Mutz), the role of nature in pre-modern economic thought (Jörg Cortekar), and strategies of

sustainability in forestry (Richard Hölzl). Finally, Project D, "Constructions and Reifications of the Environment," addresses overarching questions such as changing discourses on nature and theoretical approaches to environmental history, using examples such as the eighteenth-century cattle plague in Hanover and medical topologies of cities (Anna Hennig, Kai Hünemörder, Steffi Windelen).

This very stimulating workshop closed with a few concluding remarks by Bernd Herrmann, who also presented the host members of the workshop with the official t-shirts of the 2005 trans-America tour of the Göttingen Graduate Seminar on Environmental History.

Karen Oslund and Uwe Lübken