

CONFERENCE REPORTS

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WORLD RIVERS

GHI-sponsored panel at the International Conference on Rivers and Civilization: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Major River Basins, La Crosse, Wisconsin, June 25–28, 2006. Organizer and moderator: Christof Mauch (GHI). Participants: Mark Cioc (University of California—Santa Cruz), Meredith McKittrick (Georgetown University), Donald Worster (University of Kansas) Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted (Eastern Washington University).

As part of a multidisciplinary approach to studying rivers and civilizations, this panel examined the historical context for viewing the world's major rivers. The conference was comprised of scientists, resource managers, artists, poets, writers, and historians, to name a few disciplines. In establishing the historical narrative of rivers, each of the panelists considered a specific region with its dominant river or rivers. For Europe, Marc Cioc spoke on the Rhine River, while Meredith McKittrick examined the major rivers of sub-Saharan Africa. Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted represented Eurasia with a discussion of the Volga River, and Donald Worster considered the development of rivers in North America from the ideological perspective of capitalism.

In discussing the Rhine River, Mark Cioc drew upon his eco-geography *The Rhine*, published in 2002. One of his themes was the lack of wildness in the German landscape and how rivers have evolved from being perceived as a natural part of the landscape to being understood as an administered part. Cioc traced the historical development of river engineering beginning with the Renaissance and the Italian contribution of the art, soon to become the science, of hydraulics. Armed with a scientific approach to river development, engineers viewed rivers as canals with all of their idiosyncrasies removed. In this spirit, the Rhine River was modified to the point that Cioc asked: When did the river become an artifact, no longer functioning as a biological entity? In recent years, however, there have been attempts to restore the river. But restoration also has its challenges, as much of the original habitat is no longer left along the Rhine. In concluding, Cioc cautioned against earlier efforts to tame rivers into mechanized canals. He reminded participants of the consequences of engineering a river, when fish and other species that did not have a utilitarian value become the casualties.

Following Cioc's analysis, Meredith McKittrick introduced the audience to dominant perceptions of rivers in sub-Saharan Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given the overwhelming presence of the European powers in Africa in the nineteenth century, McKittrick framed much of her discussion around the effects of imperialism in developing Africa's rivers. In contrast to pastoral and romanticized visions of rivers, in southern Africa, rivers were also dangerous places. But McKittrick also emphasized the diversity of rivers in southern Africa and included language maps in her presentation. She reviewed the alternative historical dramas regarding rivers and how the riparian peoples claimed to have power over water. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, rivers reached a new ascendancy, and as they became the major highways, the Europeans were not happy that the rivers were not under their control. Despite the lack of ownership, Europeans did not stop dreaming about what they could do with the rivers in Africa. McKittrick included several examples of European schemes to develop rivers in southern Africa, such as the development plans in the Portuguese territories of Mozambique and Angola. The discussion concluded with comments regarding the interesting sociological aspects of these schemes.

In considering Eurasian rivers, Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted focused on how artistic depictions of the Volga River in the nineteenth century contributed to an emerging Russian national narrative. Beginning with the absence of a landscape aesthetic in Russia until the mid-nineteenth century, Zeisler-Vralsted traced the evolution of landscape art from early Italian scenes to nineteenth-century works such as those of the Hudson River School. Russian artists such as Issak Levitan paralleled the efforts of American artists, as each sought to celebrate their native landscapes. Many of Levitan's better-known works included the Volga River, and Zeisler-Vralsted showed a number of slides of his paintings. In each work, several themes dominated, including the centrality of the Volga River in the Russian national narrative, complemented by the ever-present immense Russian space and the iconic symbol of the Russian Orthodox Church in the foreground. Adding to Levitan's work was the art of another Russian painter, Ilya Repin, whose famous work "The Bargehaulers" shows the Volga River as part of the oppressor of Russian souls. In this depiction, the bargehaulers, or *burlaki*, are tethered to a barge in the Volga River as they move the ship along the channel. Zeisler-Vralsted compared this depiction of the Volga with paintings of the Mississippi River by Caleb Bingham. The contrast was evident, as Bingham's portraits, such as the "The Jolly Flatboatmen," evoke a patriotic sentiment that celebrates exceptionalism and individuality. In concluding, Zeisler-Vralsted reiterated the importance of considering the artistic legacies of

the world's rivers, as these legacies also contribute to a better understanding of historical developments.

The last panelist was Donald Worster, who drew upon a number of his earlier works in his discussion of the powerful historical forces that prompt us to think about rivers. He considered how controlling these historical forces are and how one of the most entrenched is capitalism. Worster used the example of the textile factories on the Merrimack River in the northeastern United States to demonstrate how water, like land, became commodified. This change in thinking about resources was a product of the logic of capitalism, where the chief goal was to increase one's personal wealth and to experience endless growth. Worster argued that in order to do this, nature must be disassembled and then put back together. He cited Adam Smith, who said "the greatest of all improvements is the good roads, canals, and navigable rivers." Karl Marx complemented Smith's ideas, as Marx contended that rivers should be reorganized for their potential. According to Worster, Marx and Smith taught the rest of the world how to think, as both saw rivers in terms of their potential. Worster supported this theme with examples of developments of rivers in North America such as the Colorado, and he also considered legislation such as the Reclamation Act, which recognized the limits of capital but also ushered in an age of big dams and irrigation projects. Similar to Cioc, Worster also cautioned the participants to think about the environmental degradation that ensued from the commodification of rivers.

Lively discussion, moderated by Christof Mauch, followed these presentations. Many audience members representing various disciplines posed questions. The panel succeeded in providing a historical framework in which to view subsequent discussions regarding rivers and civilization.

Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted