GREEN CAPITALISM? EXPLORING THE CROSSROADS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND BUSINESS HISTORY

Conference at the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware. October 30-31, 2014. Co-sponsored by the Center for the History of Business, Technology and Society and the GHI Washington. Conveners: Adam Rome (University of Delaware), Yda Schreuder (University of Delaware), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Erik Rau (Hagley Museum and Library), and Roger Horowitz (Hagley Museum and Library). Participants: Brian Balogh (University of Virginia), Ann-Kristin Bergquist (Umeå University), Regina Lee Blaszczyk (University of Leeds), Brian C. Black (Penn State Altoona), Emily K. Brock (Max Planck Institute, Berlin), William D. Bryan (Emory University), Lynn Catanese (Hagley Museum), B. R. Cohen (Lafayette College), David B. Cohen (Brandeis University), Julie Cohn (University of Houston), Bart Elmore (University of Alabama), Leif Fredrickson (University of Virginia), Hugh Gorman (Michigan Technology University), Ann Greene (University of Pennsylvania), Rachel Gross (University of Wisconsin), Alice Hanes (Hagley Museum), Ai Hisano (University of Delaware), David Kinkela (State University of New York Fredonia), Astrid Mignon Kirchhof (Georgetown University), Roman Köster (Bundeswehr University Munich), Laurie Rizzo (Hagley Museum), Christine Meisner Rosen (Haas School of Business, University of California-Berkeley), Matthew Plishka (Lafayette College), Simone Müller-Pohl (University of Freiburg), Adam Rome (University of Delaware), Yda Schreuder (University of Delaware), Frank Uekötter (University of Birmingham), Laura Wahl (Hagley Museum).

Can capitalism be green, or at least greener? The fact that the Oxford Handbook of Business History does not spend a single word on the natural environment goes to show that business and environmental historians do not talk to each other much. This two-day conference strove to change this by opening up opportunities for environmental and business historians to communicate. An important goal of this dialogue was to provide historical perspectives on topics with pressing contemporary relevance by raising questions such as: How have businesses mitigated pollution and other harmful environmental impacts? What were their reasons and objectives, and what were the political, economic, and social circumstances? Why and in what context have businesses or business organizations advocated environmental regulations? When and why did businesses seek to encourage changes in consumer
behavior that have had environmental implications? How has the globalization of business affected environmental concerns? How have issues related to the environment and to natural resources influenced business initiatives in different local, regional, national or international contexts?

Sixteen presenters and five commentators shed light on these questions from different angles. The papers in the first session, “Firms as Conservationists?”, reflected on the relationship between business and conservation in twentieth-century America. William Bryan presented on the topic of “Corporate Conservation and Conflict: Determining the Ideal Forms of Development for the American South,” revealing how Southern businesses used environmentalism and sustainability as an opportunity to build a new economy based on natural resources. In her talk on “Utilities as Conservationists: The Conundrum of Electrification during the Progressive Era in North America,” Julie Cohn elucidated society’s perception of electric energy as clean and green. As she pointed out, power companies pursued conservationist practices only at certain times, while the history of electrification as a whole underscores the implications of industrial practices more broadly. In the next presentation, on “Capitalism and the Wilderness Idea: The Case of the Great Northern Paper Company,” David Cohen analyzed this firm’s success in promoting a set of ideas compatible with its business while cooperating with conservationists. The firm’s influence rose as it set the tone for the discourse about conservation efforts in Maine. In the panel’s final presentation, “How Green was Chemurgy? Biofuel between Chemical Utopias and Corporate Realities in New Deal America,” Frank Uekoetter introduced the audience to the Chemurgy movement, a movement organized by chemists in support of biofuel, who were motivated by a sense of responsibility for business and society alike. Instead of seeing Chemurgy as an environmental movement, Uekoetter viewed it as an expert movement, strong in its professional convictions, but weak in its awareness of social and moral issues, and lacking a business plan. The idea never took off.

The following session, entitled “Consumer’s Demands,” explored the extent and limits of green consumerism. In her talk “Making Natural: The Color Control of Florida Oranges, 1930s-1950s,” the first speaker, Ai Hisano, discussed the continuous manipulation of the appearance of oranges. Even before genetic engineering, it became normal to depict the fruits as unnaturally bright and colorful to attain
higher prices. In the next paper, “Energy Hinge? Green Consumerism and the American Energy Scene since 1973,” Brian Black focused on the changing perception of energy consumption after the Oil Crisis of 1973 and argued that, since that crisis, an awareness of supply scarcity seems to be having a long-term impact on energy markets, particularly in personal transportation. Finally, in her paper “Greening Outdoor Recreation in the Age of Plastics,” Rachel Gross analyzed the connection between the outdoor leisure industry and politically aware consumerism. She claimed that outdoor clothing companies have redefined green consumption by cultivating a green image, so that twenty-first-century consumers, especially those who identify as outdoor enthusiasts, regard these companies as leaders in green business practices.

The last panel of the first day was entitled “Globalization” and featured three presentations that concentrated on global trade. In his paper “Cottonseed, Oil, and the Environmental Entanglements of a Global Gilded Age Industry,” Benjamin Cohen argued that early food manufacturing industries were shaped by environmental conditions and deliberately sought to configure environmental networks as systems of commercial interaction and identity. Emily Brock’s paper, “Naming Commodities: Colonial Power, American Business and the Rebranding of a Tropical Forest Tree in the Philippines,” analyzed the commodification of tropical forests within the context of imperial economic interests, relating this process to the combined product of government agendas, market realities, and forest management. The panel’s last paper, “Why American Cities Go Wasting Abroad: Local Political Economy and International Trade in Hazardous Waste,” presented by Simone Müller-Pohl, examined the short-sightedness of U.S. environmental legislation, with which cities are not always able to comply because they are incapable of providing alternative means of disposing of dangerous waste. In her case study of Philadelphia, this led to a ship carrying toxic waste having to spend more than two years at sea in search of a legal dumping ground, which was never found.

The first panel on the following day focused on different approaches and challenges of “Firms Going Green” and began with David Kinkela’s paper “Hi-Cone Plastic Six-Pack Rings, Ocean Pollution, and the Challenge of a Global Environmental Problem.” Kinkela told the story of how plastic six-pack packages, a cheap and easy way to sell soda and beer all over the world, are causing huge problems
because of their lethal effect of entangling and killing marine animals when discarded products enter the ocean. Next, Bart Elmore’s paper, “Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism,” presented the unique corporate structure of the Coca Cola business empire that helped distribute Coke all over the world. Elmore pointed out that the company displayed ecological responsibility and stewardship by reducing waste and recycling water. In the following paper, “The Rise and Fall of an Ecostar: Environmental Technology Innovation and Marketing as Policy Obstruction,” Leif Frederickson argued that the car maker Ford’s green marketing philosophy was primarily public manipulation, since the firm was more interested in selling the idea of an advanced “green” technology than the actual technology. The last paper on this panel, Ann-Kristin Bergquist’s “Dilemmas of Going Green: Company Strategies in Boliden of 1960-2000,” introduced a case study of a Swedish company dealing with pollution. Bergquist argued that companies were often in ambiguous situations: whereas addressing environmental pollution often requires prompt action, developing appropriate technologies and dealing with economic realities takes time.

The fifth and final conference panel, entitled “Governance”, illustrated the importance of environmental politics and governance for many societies and states. In his talk “Private Companies and the Recycling of Household Waste in West Germany 1965-1990,” Roman Köster pointed out that since the 1970s, German cities have contracted with private companies to collect and recycle secondary raw materials. Thus, in the West German case, the state created a market in which private firms, which initially had little concern for green practices, could successfully compete and contribute to environmental protection. The panel concluded with Hugh Gorman’s talk on “The Role of Businesses in Constructing Systems of Environmental Governance,” which examined adaptive governance, an iterative process directed towards achieving environmental aims. Gorman hypothesized that regulation can be more influential than producer and consumer decisions, and that maintaining a focus on long-term goals rather than governing in disaster-response cycles can counteract the economic interests of businesses that conflict with sustainability objectives.

Commentators and participants alike concluded that most papers highlighted a power relationship between economy and ecology, politics and society, as well as within the norms and cultures that influence these connections. The discussions were fruitful but also
illustrated that environmental and business historians do not always speak the same language. In the words of one participant: historians of these two disciplines need “couples counseling” in order to communicate more effectively. Therefore the suggestion that both disciplines should improve their communication at future joint conferences was widely appreciated and supported. As frequently noted at the gathering, questions of class and gender as well as certain historical actors, especially voters and consumers, were underrepresented and future workshops should follow up on these aspects.

The conference took place in Wilmington, Delaware, on the beautiful premises of the gunpowder works founded by E. I. du Pont in 1802 along the banks of the Brandywine. The site of the ancestral home and gardens of the du Pont family, with its restored mills and workers’ community, exemplifies early American industry. As a special treat during the sunny October weekend when the conference took place, there was a spontaneous tour of the du Pont mansion as well as walks through the park during the lunchtime breaks.

Astrid Mignon Kirchhof (GHI/Georgetown University)