

RCC September Fellows Workshop

Veranstalter: Christof Mauch / Helmuth Trischler, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

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Science as the true source of wonder, Romanian forest politics, and a comprehensive history of the Carpathian basin – these three diverse topics formed the basis of the September Fellows workshop at the RCC.

In her talk, „Wonder, Enchantment: Science, Religion, and Nature“, LISA SIDERIS introduced a new quasi-religious (or anti-religion) movement, based primarily in the United States, that sees science as the source of wonder and „religious“ enlightenment. Movement followers hold that the time for conventional religion has passed, basing their beliefs instead on the sense of wonder and enchantment found by using scientific research to explain unusual and seemingly miraculous occurrences in Nature. Sideris then elaborated on various types of wonder that are found within this „science as religion“ movement. She also profiled some of the movement’s leaders, including Richard Dawkins and Edward O. Wilson. As Sideris summarized, Dawkins aims to reveal science (and not religion) as the source of authentic wonder; Wilson claims that science is religion’s chief competitor. Sideris concluded her talk by critically pondering what types of wonder these scientists and movement leaders can offer non-scientists. In addition, Sideris also questioned whether scientists have thus stolen wonder for themselves, leaving all non-scientists with only a child-like, naïve sense of wonder. The discussion following Sideris’s presentation focused on how risk society and enlightenment philosophy have shaped these debates, as well as the role of the humanities in re-enchantment debates.

STEFAN DORONDEL presented the results of his anthropological work in two Romanian villages in his talk, „The Contested Forest: National Parks, Land Reform, and Local Politics in Post-socialist Romania“. Dorondel’s talk concentrated on his investigation into for-

est politics in Dragomiresti and Dragova, two villages in Romania with diverse terrain yet similar developments in land politics following the collapse of the Soviet Union. After describing his methods and the differences between the two villages, Dorondel profiled the sources of land conflict which have impacted deforestation in the region. There exist numerous historically complex and contested property claims for forest land from individuals and families in the villages. Furthermore, the Romanian state created an unwanted national park in a large part of this forest in the 1990s, which has reduced villagers’ access to a necessary economic staple – wood. Finally, the mayor has used his political connections in order to obtain logging rights that directly benefit his wife’s logging company. Based on his observations, Dorondel concluded by identifying two types (and causes) of deforestation in this region. The first type occurs on a smaller scale and is usually caused by individuals reacting against an imposed national park and thereby indirectly, the state. The second type happens on a much larger, industrial scale; it is normally conducted by logging firms sanctioned by the local government. In the discussion following Dorondel’s presentation, participants inquired about the impact of tourism on deforestation, the homogeneity of the villagers, and the connection between the deforestation in these Romanian villages and environmental problems found in other former Soviet countries.

As he himself stated, LAJOS RÁCZ took the challenge of delivering a concise presentation before lunch break and gave a humorous overview of his Carson Center project in his talk, „The Price of Survival: The Transformation of the Hungarian Landscapes in History“. Rácz began with a personal introduction, describing the moment (date and place) when he decided to write a comprehensive volume about the environmental history of Hungary during the last millennium. He emphasized that his project focuses on a common geographical area – the Carpathian Basin – not on a national or political area. His long durée investigation seeks to establish how the climate has changed in this region, as well as how well residents have been able to adapt to these changes. Rácz has started his work by

reconstructing historical climate data; in order to accomplish this, he has examined over 270,000 historical sources. Basing his work on the theories of Arnold Toynbee, Rácz then examined a variety of examples of how the structure of the settlements (and therefore the economy) in the Carpathian Basin has transformed as a result of climate change. One example that he gave focused on changes during the Turkish wars (16th/17th century); due to an increase in bodies of water and the loss of forest land, market town type settlements developed. These towns were not agricultural in nature, but supported cattle in a „pen garden system.“ Rácz concluded his talk by listing several examples of similar changes in the 18th and 19th century. The discussion on his presentation focused on his plans for integrating disease into his history, how precipitation in the Little Ice Age can be interpreted, and how the pen garden system organized the division of labor in market towns.

Fulfilling his promise, Rácz finished in time for all presenters and participants to enjoy a light lunch at the Carson Center. After three such diverse and provocative presentations, discussions ranged from how ‘science as wonder’ activists explain Santa Claus to debates over the role of national parks to a more in-depth explanation of the role of climate in the Carpathian Basin.

Workshop overview:

Lisa Sideris (RCC/Indiana University): Enchantment of Nature - Enchantment of Religion

Stefan Dorondel (RCC/Humboldt University Berlin): The Contested Forest: National Parks, Land Reform and Local Politics in Postsocialist Romania

Lajos Rácz (RCC/Szeged University): The Price of Survival: Transformations of the Hungarian Landscape in History

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