Environmental Change and Migration in Historical Perspective

Veranstalter: Uwe Lübken, The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society; Franz Mauelshagen, Munich and the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Essen
Datum, Ort: 04.08.2011–06.08.2011, Munich, Germany
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For two days, scholars from around the world gathered at the Internationales Begegnungszentrum in Munich to discuss the intersections between environmental change and migration from a historical perspective. In their introductory remarks UWE LÜBKEN (Munich) and FRANZ MAUELSHAGEN (Essen) elaborated on the growing body of literature on environmental change and migration while also identifying a lack of empirical studies – a deficit particularly noticeable in historical scholarship. Both conveners expressed the hope that this conference would significantly contribute to filling this gap.

In his opening lecture, ANTHONY OLIVER-SMITH (Gainesville, FL) deconstructed the term „environmental migration" beginning with one of the main questions in the current debate: how and to what extent does environmental change trigger displacement, migration and resettlement? Oliver-Smith then examined a key concept to answer this question – social vulnerability – as it links the relationship that people have with their environment to social factors. This, however, also complicates matters significantly, and, consequently Oliver-Smith explicitly stressed the multi-causality and complexity of disaster, environmental change, and environmental migration.

The first panel of the conference, „Climates of Colonization", was opened by LAWRENCE CULVER (Logan, UT) who elaborated on the historic role of climate (real, perceived, and imagined) in the settlement and migration history of North America. He focused in particular on the so-called Great American Desert and California, which both attracted large numbers of migrants in the late nineteenth century. Culver connected the current concern over climate change to a longer history of climatic debates and showed how the climates of those regions were „sold" in order to lure (white) settlers while natural hazards such as heat, fire, and drought, were portrayed as having been overcome by technological inventions. KEVIN BROWN (Pittsburgh, PA) focused on migration to and from the cutover lands – a specific type of landscape created by the lumber industry – in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan (1900-1940). He demonstrated how the lumber companies radically transformed both the ecosystem and social relations of these areas. The two main problems of the fallow land (firestorms and exhaustion of profit) were disguised by advertising the landscape as an ideal place to settle and farm. Brown underlined the gap between the self-interests of land sellers and the harsh reality of working on the cutover lands. He concluded that migration served as one market-based solution to an environmental and social problem.

The second panel focused on „Relocation, Resettlement, and Rehabilitation". STEFANIE BELHARTE (Munich) gave some insight into „Cultures of Migration" with her presentation on an anthropological case study in northwest Papua New Guinea. Baseline mobility in the village of Krisa was determined by patterns of resource use, harvesting strategies, and cultural norms. For most people of the community it was normal to maintain more than one place of residence, to constantly move in and out of accommodations and hence to live in a state of fluidity. This dynamic and highly mobile nature of society allowed the Krisa community to efficiently deal and cope with environmental change – a capacity, however, increasingly threatened by development and modernization. In the following discussion about spatial mobility as a coping strategy, participants mentioned that distance from the place of origin itself is not a relevant factor for defining migration. This point was illustrated by ROBIN BRONEN's (Fairbanks, AK) presentation on the indigenous community of Newtok, Alaska, which has decided to relocate nine miles to a much safer place. Climate change, both as a steady and ongoing development as well

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as a trigger for increasingly frequent natural disasters, is the single most important factor in threatening the livelihoods of indigenous communities in Alaska. Bronen introduced the term „climigration" to distinguish climate change induced movements from other forms of displacement. Her main point is that for „climigrants," there will be no home to which they can return. Therefore, the creation of a relocation policy framework based on human rights is essential. CHINNAKKANNU VALATHEESWARAN (Thiruvananthapuram) talked about the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Tamil Nadu, India. The example of two affected villages, Kallar and Keechanguppam, showed that the relief assistance had positively impacted the residents' livelihood. He concluded that, despite the deaths of many in the tsunami, the living condition of the remaining population has improved due to relief assistance provided by the local government and the NGOs, and that – unlike in many other regions affected by the tsunami – people were enabled to stay.

The fourth session dealt with „Migration as a Coping Strategy". Unfortunately, ANNELIES ZOOMERS (Utrecht) was unable to participate in the conference in person; her paper nevertheless opened the session. She focused on climate change, environmental change, and „new mobilities" in the Bolivian Andes and stated that strategies of mobility such as double residences in high and low altitudes are not a failure of adaptation but are rather part of the inhabitants' „tool kit" in order to use the region's verticality for their own good. VIPUL SINGH's paper (Delhi) on migration patterns and everyday forms of resistance of a pastoral community in India presented yet another form of migration, using the example of the Raikas, a traditional camel and sheep herding community in western Rajasthan. While mobility has historically been part of their planned livelihood strategy, in recent years and due to environmental deterioration, these pastoralists have left their traditional herding grounds, thereby turning their circular movement into a long distance and long-term migration.

The discussion on whether or not nomadic pastoralism is a form of environmental migration opened the stage for the subsequent session on the „Complexities of Environmental Migration". Here CALUM NICHOLSON (Swansea) elaborated on the „riddle of environmental migration." In his fundamental criticism of the very concept of environmental migration he held that there was not even a consensus on the terminology. Environmental migration, according to Nicholson, is nothing more than a tool to talk about other issues such as national security. Following from this, DAVID SOLL (Easton, PA) added demographic aspects to the discussion of environmental migration in looking at the interactions between health improvements, population growth, and urban expansion in Manila and Lima. Soll established the connection between mid-twentieth century health improvements in the rural areas of the Philippines and Peru to the massive migration into metropolitan areas and argued that this movement should not be viewed as a sign of urban deterioration but rather as the result of significantly improved living conditions in the countryside, even if it overwhelmed municipal governing capacities for decades. RÜDIGER GLASER (Freiburg) offered insights into the regional vulnerability and resilience in Central Europe since AD 1000. With the advantage of having a large amount of historic chronicles and data on Middle Europe at hand, shifting zones of vulnerability and their correlation to demographic structures can be traced and mapped, enabling researchers to examine which livelihood strategies proved successful, which strengthened local resilience, and which stressors forced people to relocate.

The sixth panel brought together two papers on the topic of „Migrants' Environmental Experience and Impact". FEI SHENG's (Peking / Canberra) presentation on Chinese immigration to Australia during the mid-nineteenth century Gold Rush outlined both the activities and the interactions of the Chinese migrants with the Australian environment. His research reveals how the immigrants applied their native environmental experience in a white settler community and thus helped transform existing landscapes. SÍLVIO MARCUS DE SOUZA CORREA (Florianópolis) described in a comparative analysis the result of German immigration on the

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tropical and subtropical areas in Brazil and Africa with a focus on competing economic uses of the environment between the settlers and local communities. He concluded that in terms of human ecology one of the biggest impacts of the German colonization took place in the native population because the expansion of the settlement compromised the livelihood of the native groups.

The last session looked at the topic of „Disaster and (Return)-Migration". Based on the Messina earthquake in 1908 and the Belice Valley Earthquake in 1968, GIACOMO PARRINELLO (Siena) reflected on post-disaster migration out of the hazardscape and the return-migration days, weeks, or months after the event. Both earthquakes caused massive initial displacements; their long-term demographic consequences, however, differed greatly, thus underlining once again that there is no simple connection between a disaster and migration. Instead, it is a complex field in which public policies, historical trends and social as well as economic factors are involved. JOHNSON OKORAFOR NDUBUISI (Owerri) dedicated his paper to a case study of Fulani migrants in the Sahelian droughts from 1970 till 2000. In this case, the drought was a strong push factor, forcing many nationals of Niger into Nigeria, and mobility was key to survival. He particularly emphasized the important role that ethnic networks played in cross-border migrations. In the absence of RANJAN CHAKRABARTI (Kolkata), the conference participants discussed his paper on the Kolkata Cyclone / Earthquake of 1737. It led to the question of why people move to disaster prone areas in the first place. The answers here too are manifold, ranging from settlement schemes, to a lack of alternatives or the belief in technological solutions.

The final discussion was opened by comments of FRANCOIS GEMENNE (Paris) who summarized the papers as well as some of the main issues from the discussions with three points. First, he stressed the great diversity of migration patterns, reflected by the papers given at the conference. Thus, environmental migration can illustrate a problem as much as a solution and the question is whether or not the various types of migration patterns can fit into a common framework. Second, he focused on the contrast between the recent emphasis on environmental migration and the lack of historical examples. Why has this issue only recently become of interest to historians, especially given the long acknowledged connection between the environment and migration? Climate change effectively has pushed it onto the political, and therefore also, the scientific agenda. Third, he asked whether there can be an extension of the links between environmental migration and colonization as some of the papers seem to suggest. What if climate change is just a new form of colonization – a colonization process of the atmosphere by industrialized nations at the cost of mostly poor countries? In the end, as Gemenne pointed out, researchers are too concerned with the establishment of a close relationship between the environment and migration, thereby turning environmental migration into a rigid social construct instead of recognizing it as an ongoing process of debate and dispute. With all this in mind and with the notion of mobility as a buffer between the environment and society, the incentive and interest to reflect on the history of environmental migration becomes evident.

Subsequently, the final discussion centered on questions that pointed to the social, political, and cultural aspects of environmental migration. Who defines migrants? When displaced people do not consider themselves to be environmental migrants, then who can label them as such? Whose reality counts? Although environmental factors, universal yet also highly diverse, seem to be part of all migration stories, they are hardly ever elaborated on. However, does this mean that environmental migration as such does not exist or does it simply not work as a concept? These deliberations, as well as the diversity of papers brought the discussion back to a point Anthony Oliver-Smith had raised in the beginning: Environments are different from nature as they are socially constructed, thus framing and molding natural features by so-

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cial forces.[1]

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction

Christof Mauch (RCC), Uwe Lübken (RCC), Franz Mauelshagen (KWI)

Session 1

Opening Lecture

Anthony Oliver-Smith (University of Florida): Environmental Migrants? Nature, Society, and Population Displacement

Session 2: Climates of Colonization
Chair Franz Mauelshagen (KWI)

Lawrence Culver (Utah State University): The Desert and the Garden: Climate as Attractor and Obstacle in the Settlement History of North America

Kevin C. Brown (Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA): Environment, Markets, and Migration to the Cutover Lands of Minnesota, 1900-1940

Session 3: Relocation, Resettlement, and Rehabilitation
Chair Christof Mauch (RCC)

Stefanie Belharte (RCC): Cultures of Migration: A Case Study from Far Northwest Papua New Guinea

Robin Bronen (University of Alaska): Climate-Induced Community Relocation: Creating an Adaptive Government Response Based in Human Rights Doctrine

C. Valatheeswaran (Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala): The Environmentally Induced Displaced People in Tamil Nadu: Rehabilitation Mechanisms and Rebuilding Livelihood Strategies

Session 4: Mobility / Migration as a Coping Strategy
Chair John McNeill (Georgetown University / RCC)

Annelies Zoomers (Utrecht University): Climate Change, Environmental Change, and „New Mobilities" in the Bolivian Andes

Vipul Singh (University of Delhi): Environmental Migrants: Migration Pattern and Everyday Forms of Resistance of a Pastoral Community of Rajasthan, India

Session 5: The Complexities of Environmental Migration
Chair John McNeill (Georgetown University / RCC)

Calum Nicholson (Swansea University): The Riddle of Environmental Migration

David Soll (Lafayette College, Easton, PA): The Irony of Sanitation: Health, Population Change, and Rural Outmigration

Rüdiger Glaser (Freiburg University): Spatio-Temporal Change of Climate-Induced Regional Vulnerability and Resilience in Central Europe since AD 1000

Session 6: The Migrants' Environmental Experience and Impact
Chair Francois Gemenne (Sciences Po)

Fei Sheng (Peking University / Australian National University): Shaping the New Gold Mountain: Environmental Experience of Chinese in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Australian Gold Rush

Sílvio Marcus de Souza Correa (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis): Immigration and Its Environmental Impacts on the „German Tropics"

Session 7: Disaster and (Return) Migration
Chair Uwe Lübken (RCC)

Ranjan Chakrabarti (Jadavpur University, Kolkata): Climate and Settlement: A Case Study of the Kolkata Cyclone / Earthquake of 1737

Giacomo Parrinello (University of Siena): Post-Disaster Migrations and Returns in Sicily: the Messina (1908) and Belice Valley (1968) Earthquakes

Johnson Okorafor Ndubuisi (Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria): The Sahelian Drought and Migration of the Fulani's into

[1] The conference Environmental Change and Migration in Historical Perspective was organized by Climates of Migration, a joint project by the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, KWI), Essen and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich.

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Nigeria, 1970-2000

Final Discussion
Introductory Comments by Francois Gemenne (Sciences Po)

Tagungsbericht *Environmental Change and Migration in Historical Perspective*. 04.08.2011–06.08.2011, Munich, Germany, in: H-Soz-Kult 26.11.2011.

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