

State of Nature - Nature&Nation Network Second International Workshop

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Datum, Ort: 02.12.2011–04.12.2011, Bucharest, Romania

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This has been the second workshop in a series organised by the Nature&Nation Network, gathering a group of scholars interested in the historical links between nature and nation-states. The workshop aimed at showcasing and debating researches and case studies about the role of nation-states in transforming, representing and even creating nature.

The workshop was opened by GUIVION ZUMBADO's (Munich) talk about the role of nature conservation in Costa Rican national identity. Zumbado's tale was split in two chronologically distinct sections, before and after the rise of a democratic government in 1949. The late 19th - early 20th centuries, which featured both a classical liberal-conservative regime and a short dictatorship, were marked by a strictly utilitarian representation of nature, seen as an agricultural landscape of plantations and a backdrop for emblems of high-modernism (e.g. trains). In the same years Costa Rica underwent considerable habitat loss, deforestation and irreparable ecosystem transformations. In contrast to this period in the second half of the 20th century the state seems to have focussed on propagandizing the image of a lush and undisturbed nature, in an effort to transform national identity from that of a prototypical mesoamerican plantation country to that of an internationally recognised eco-tourist destination. Zumbado's point is that political changes were reflected in the modification of

the ideal representation of the country and that a new „ecological symbolism“ got over time a leading role in shaping national awareness.

MIROSLAV TASCU-STAVRE and CRISTINA STANCA (Bucharest) talked about the alleged greening of communist ideology in Romania in the late 1970s - early 1980s and its role as a possible tool of mass mobilization for a regime that was increasingly losing credibility. The Romanian regime took hold of some green catchwords (recycling, energy conservation, nature conservation) to conceal and justify the difficult economic conditions of the early 1980s. But the environmental policies of the Romanian communist government seem to have been rather opportunistic, being more tools of propaganda than expression of real environmental concerns. One of the themes of discussion spurred by this presentation, and a recurring one during the whole workshop, was the viability of making a historical distinction between a real-socialist and a capitalist approach to the management of nature. The audience settled on the idea that similarities were more than the differences and that both ideologies had a strongly anti-environmentalist stance, based on what has been termed an industrialist „religion of growth.“

DOROTHY ZEISLER-VRALSTED (Spokane) discussed the role of the Mississippi and Volga rivers in informing respectively the history of the United States and Russia. An example of the overarching cultural similarities of these two very different countries in respect to their perception of the environment may be given by the fact that the ideal benchmark of beauty for the historical representations of both rivers has been the landscape of such European rivers as the Rhine. Zeisler-Vralsted's main interest in this instance was however the „hydromodernization“ that took place in both Russia and the United States in the 1920s and the 1930s. This process, that involved the building of great dams and canals, was enacted independently from ideology: from „the point of view of the river“ it did not matter if the modernization was pursued within a capitalist or communist framework, since the effects on the natural world were

essentially the same in both countries. As had already been hinted to after Tascu-Stavre and Stanca's talk, Zeisler-Vralsted explained how a common ideology of growth and modernization overshadowed political distinctions in the way nature was perceived and managed already since the 1930s.

ARNOST STANZEL (Munich), using examples taken from the party press, has attempted to give insights into the relationship of the Czechoslovak regime with the environment, its approach to the use of water as an energy resource, and its rhetorical use of hydropower. In the early years of the regime the creation of new infrastructures and the development of peripheral regions were important aspects of regime propaganda, and hydropower was presented as one of the main means to achieve these goals. In this context taming and subjugating nature was presented by the party press, even using an almost religious word choice, as an essential element in the construction of a new social order. What was undoubtedly lacking was however the understanding of the actual role of nature, which, thanks to the efforts of the new communist regime, was supposed to become a perfectly controllable resource. A completely different, less enthusiastic and more techno-bureaucratic approach to hydropower was adopted instead after 1960, when, according to Stanzel, nuclear power seemed to take over the role as the most advanced and modern means to overcome the country's energy deficit.

MAURO VAN AKEN (Milan) gave a fascinating talk about the process by which in the last twenty years the east bank of the Jordan Valley has become a laboratory in the management of water resources in arid areas. Water has been nationalised in the Jordan Valley, in an attempt to face major social and environmental changes in a transnational region marked over the years by armed conflicts, tense international relationships and a rising agribusiness sector. A wholly new spatial organisation, part of a new resource centralisation policy and including major resettlement projects for Bedouins and Palestinian refugees, has been imposed in the region, leading to the disruption of local knowledge and use rights in favour of the creation

of a new state-driven use regime. Scarcity, property, and expertise have become the notions defining a completely new relationship between water and society and leading to a „desocialization“ of water. Nonetheless, as Van Aken has related, the local communities have found also ways to maintain their traditional rights of use along the hypertechnicised new management system.

According to STEFANIA BARCA (Coimbra) the Kingdom of Naples, with the huge social and political turmoil it experienced in the 18th and early 19th centuries, is an exceptionally apt case study for the analysis of the modification over time of the state/nature relationship. Economically the kingdom was specialised in agriculture, dependent on external markets and widely considered a backward area. Enlightened intellectuals started soon to ask for the development of the country following the precepts of political economy and the English example, aiming at the improvement of the „natural forces“ of the country and at the elimination of any waste, including customary rights of use and collective resource uses, both deemed irrational. In the Neapolitan periphery this project acquired the added value of a project of a liberation, able to free both society and nature from the greed of feudal structures. Particularly relevant was, at this regard, the ambivalence of peasant reactions to state modernization: on the one side peasants often protested or rioted, on the other almost as often they asked for the intervention of the state as a means to achieve security in respect to environmental risks and against feudality. The new understanding of resources offered by political economy was moreover instrumental in the creation of a new national conscience. On the long term however the weakness of the state in southern Italy hindered a real development, since the schemes made to redesign the nature/society relationship, in particular as regards management of water-courses, flood control, and land reclamation, were only scantily implemented: Barca stated thus that the different regimes that ruled the Kingdom of Naples at the turn of 1800 proved to be, despite the magnitude of the theoretical debate on political economy, actually „unimproving states.“

MARK BASSIN (Stockholm) stressed, by showing various impressive socialist realist paintings, how different ideological meanings were projected on the natural world and nature's role as a representing space for nation and nationhood in Stalinist Russia. According to Bassin socialist realism was instrumental, as a propaganda tool, in building the utopian landscapes of Soviet power through a precise use of symbology. This kind of art, in fact, was not realist at all since it did not reflect how the landscapes really looked like, but rather aimed at creating an „hyper-reality“ and at educating the population in how it was supposed to see the Soviet Union and its landscapes as utopia incarnate. This symbology was centered initially around modernization with the creation of a completely new genre dedicated to „industrial landscapes“ (e.g. the depiction of oil fields and wood mills) and the inclusion in any natural and agricultural landscape of elements exemplary of the modernization process (e.g. bicycles, trains, tractors, boats). There was thus no landscape in the early official art of the Stalinist era that was not subject in some way or the other to human control. At a much later stage, beside industrial and natural paintings, deindustrialized landscapes started to be depicted. These were characteristic of the postwar period, representing a clear cut in respect to the past and helping to represent the scars of the war, without forgetting the alleged harmony and inner virtues of Russian countryside. These values, which had already been part of zarist propaganda and had been despised during the first years of Stalinist rule, in the aftermath of World War Two came back at full force, occupying the centre of the stage. It is thus possible to see a sort of evolution (or involution) process, or at least a strong dichotomy, in the representation of nature in socialist realism: from the creation of an imaginary landscape of total modernization in the early years, to a return to more traditional values and forms of representation towards the end of Stalin's rule.

STEFAN DORONDEL (Bucharest) discussed the transformation of rights to access and use resources within the Romanian national park of Piatra Craiului. Dorondel focused on the different claims that park

officials and local communities make in respect to rights of use and access to resources. In fact, while the local communities feel to have an ancestral right of ownership on the forests and pastures that surround them the park officials stress out more non-utilitarian aspects, such as biodiversity and leisure. The main accusation that the park officials make against the local community regards the over-exploitation of the forests and meadows and a lack of care regarding the conservation of nature. On the other hand the villagers, as in many other cases where national parks have been overimposed on existing rights' structures and new „crimes“ have been created, make any possible attempt to legitimise their claims, seeing the customary rights as central to their livelihood. According to Dorondel the outstanding winners in these conflicts are the local political elites, which have the role to mediate between the community and the park administration, selecting with whom to side on a case by case basis and increasing thus their political and economic power.

MATTHEW CHEW (Phoenix) has offered the audience, as a conclusion to the workshop, an enlightening talk about the history and politics of the notion of „invading alien species.“ Chew stressed in particular how this concept, even if it is often disguised as a scientifically sound biological concept, is inherently a cultural and political product, more linked to the concept of nation-state than to ecology as a science. The concept arose in the late 18th century, in parallel to the strengthening of national identities, but is still today prominently present in political and scientific discourses on conservation biology. For example in both the US-based Nonindigenous Aquatic Species database and the EU Delivering Alien Invasive Species Inventories for Europe project political and administrative boundaries are still used as the main analytical units, even if only most rarely these correspond to ecological habitat-units.

The second workshop of the Nature&Nation was definitely a success. A very varied set of case studies was presented and the workshop allowed practitioners in very different disciplines (history, anthropology, political sciences, biology) to meet and discuss differences and similarities in

their research approaches and results. Moreover, the workshop gave the participants the opportunity to get to know the rising community of Romanian scholars interested in the study of nature/society relationships and also the members of this community the occasion to meet and tie new bonds.

Conference overview:

First panel

Guivion Zumbado: „Costa Rica: National identity building through state-run protected areas“

Miroslav Taşcu-Stavre and Cristina Stanca: „When green cleans red; or why Romanian communists turned to green ideology“

Website presentation

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg „The Rachel Carson Center’s Environment & Society Portal: www.environmentandsociety.org“

Second panel

Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted: „Rivers in totalitarian and democratic discourse“

Arnost Stanzel: „Socialist water-constructions in the Slovakian and Romanian Carpathians – A new society through the rule over nature?“

Mauro Van Aken: „Hidden waters. How Jordan reinvented water (and the hydraulic nation)“

Round table

N&N Network: Projects and perspectives

First Keynote

Stefania Barca: „Nature and political economy in a European periphery. The Kingdom of Naples, 1734-1860“

Junior Forum

Elena Davigo: „The origins of the Italian environmental movement“

Elena Diana Musat: „Environmentally induced conflicts in the Sahel“

Second Keynote

Mark Bassin: „Utopian landscapes: The politics of nature in Stalinist art“

Book presentation

Wilko von Hardenberg interviews Marco

Armiero about „A Rugged Nation“ (White Horse Press 2011)

Third Panel

Stefan Dorondel: „Who benefits from the forest? National park, land reform, and the clash of property rights in postsocialism“

Matthew Chew: „Prescriptive political biogeography: National identity and ‘invading alien’ species“

Tagungsbericht *State of Nature - Nature & Nation Network Second International Workshop*. 02.12.2011–04.12.2011, Bucharest, Romania, in: H-Soz-Kult 14.02.2012.