Atom global: Kulturen und Krisen im Vergleich

Veranstalter: Matthias Braun / Nadin Heé, Berlin; Daniel Hedinger, Freiburg
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In March 2011, the German media observed with a sense of wonder how the Japanese population coped with the Fukushima catastrophe. In contrast to Western newspaper headlines dominated by images of the apocalypse and doomsday scenarios, Japan appeared to react calmly and without panic. Asked by the German newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau if this impression was correct, Japanese philosopher Kenichi Mishima replied: „Didn't the people of Saxony who were affected by floods a couple of years ago react in an equally disciplined and cooperative manner? Back then, a few Japanese know-it-alls admired the Teutonic gift of organisation and Germanic power of endurance. I considered that to be foolish."[1]

The workshop „Atom global: Kulturen und Krisen im Vergleich", organized by the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) „Repräsentationen"[2], drew upon such perceptions in order to examine cultural differences and parallels in dealing with the risk of nuclear power. The aim was moreover to discuss perspectives of a global history of the atomic age. In their introduction, the three conveners – MATTHIAS BRAUN (Berlin), DANIEL HEDINGER (Freiburg) und NADIN HEE (Berlin) – stressed that the global dimension of nuclear energy was inherent from the outset, both with respect to its discovery and expansion, as well as to resistance against it. Illustrative of this is the notion of „One World or None," developed in 1946 by a group of leading scientists who were involved in the discovery of nuclear energy but then voiced their concerns about the new global threat posed by the atomic bomb.

The first panel „Cultures: Living with Atomic Energy" examined what impacts atomic energy had on different societies. ELISABETH RÖHRLICH (Vienna) introduced the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a global actor. Founded in 1957 when atomic energy was closely connected with the hope for an age of progress and peace, the IAEA later promoted a clear distinction between peaceful and military use of atomic energy. In the course of the *Treaties on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (1968/70), it advocated a strict control system to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons while at the same time arguing for the fundamental right to civil usage. Röhrlich explained that IAEA's global programme reveals the inherent tensions and contradictions of nuclear energy and enables an entangled history of the nuclear age.

STEFAN GUTH's (Bern) paper on the „future of the past" described four phases of dealing with nuclear energy in (post)-Soviet societies. Introducing the rhetoric of „nuclear-driven Communism" of the 1950s, Guth explained how the foundation of the atomic city Shevchenko in the Kazakh desert helped to portray atomic power as a life-giving technology and above all a means of presenting the Soviet Union as a peaceful, future-oriented nation. This was followed by a phase in which atomic energy and uranium mining was increasingly perceived as dangerous, which ultimately led to the shutdown of Shevchenko's reactor. In recent years, however, atomic energy has been experiencing a renaissance and the city – now known as Aktau – is trying to connect future prospects with those of the past.

The third paper by SIBYLLE MARTI (Zurich) analyzed the causes of and issues relating to radiophobia in Switzerland and stressed the historical significance of emotions as a key factor in dealing with this topic. She argued that fear must be understood as a political means of communication. Rather than asking if radiophobia was realistic or genuinely felt, we should approach it as an initially empty signifier which is only subsequently filled with meaning according to the respective national context. In Switzer-

[1] Christine Pries, „Verführen Sie mich bitte nicht zum Nationalismus!" Interview with Kenichi Mishima, in: Frankfurter Rundschau Online, 20.3.2011. <http://www.fr-online.de/debatte/-verfuehren-sie-mich-bitte-nicht-zum-nationalismus–,1473340,8248880.html> (26.01.2012).

[2] <http://www.sfb-repraesentationen.de> (26.01.2012).

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land, the peace and protest movements drew on the Swiss self-image of an agrarian, self-sustaining small state with a long tradition of humanitarian commitment.

TIM WARNEKE (Heidelberg) highlighted the criticism of society as expressed by the German peace movement of the 1980s and introduced a typology of its mentality. Based on Günther Anders' diagnosis of societies' lack of rationality, Warneke described the peace movement as a future oriented movement with a prophetic self-image which viewed the future of mankind from the perspective of its demise. Moreover, he identified ideology-critical, nationalist, anti-American, psychoanalytical and metaphysical tendencies in the movement's social analyses. Finally, he argued that the German peace movement had neo-Romantic traits and was, in this regard, an exception among European protest movements.

In his commentary on the four papers, HARTMUT KAELBLE (Berlin) discussed the periodization of the nuclear age. He proposed closer examination of transnational entanglements when considering national examples. The discussion demonstrated that despite global connections, the national context is formative in considering atomic power. At the same time, transnational perspectives of a „common destiny" are shared beyond borders and surface in crisis and catastrophe situations.

The second panel „Crisis: Societies Dealing with Catastrophes" turned to crisis and the perceptions thereof. SUSANNE SCHREGEL (Weimar) presented nuclear-free zones as a form of transnational protest. Starting in Manchester of the early 1980s, initiatives, buildings, cities, or whole regions declared themselves free of nuclear weapons. Under international law, this was inconsequential, but later proved important to be a global protest phenomenon. Space thus became a factor for social interactions in which the relationship between local and global nuclear threats were negotiated. Schregel argued that the proclamation of nuclear-free zones not only spread globally but helped to enact globalization in the first place.

KARENA KALMBACH (Florenz) analysed the ways in which France dealt with the catastrophe at Chernobyl and further showed how the memory of it stimulated a discussion between expert state officials and civic counter-experts. They increasingly discussed whether the issue of radioactive fall out was the responsibility of the country's elites. Labelled by critics as „nucleocrats," they were suspected of covering up the real threat, in order to distract from the close link between military and civil uses of nuclear power, and to prevent damage resulting from France's image as a nuclear power. On the 10th and 20th anniversaries of the Chernobyl, the disaster was used as a tool to establish a counter-narrative against the French elites.

In Eastern Europe, Chernobyl became a catalyst for social movements, too. MELANIE ARNDT (Potsdam) contrasted the diverging development of environmental movements in Lithuania and Belarus. In both countries, the immediate outrage over the catastrophe was followed by a phase of disappointment at the beginning of the 1990s. This was succeeded by another wave of optimism and disappointment. While the development of new nuclear power plants was inhibited successfully in Lithuania, Chernobyl did not spur a larger environmental movement in Belarus. In contrast to the West, Chernobyl did not lead to protest against an excessively affluent society. Instead, activists aimed their attentions against the Soviet Union's power structure, demanding a democratization of society.

STEFFI RICHTER (Leipzig) presented the initial results of her research on post-Fukushima Japan. These indicate developments that may lead to a profound change in the Japanese society. The catastrophe destroyed the myth of the Japanese core family, which was based on postwar technological progress and the nexus between family and economy. Moreover, the catastrophe led to a debate about societal divisions and the destiny of „atomic nomads" who were employed to clean up the reactor site.

In his commentary, JOCHEN ROOSE (Berlin) criticized constructionist approaches in the analysis of societies and proposed the concept of framing to compare different national contexts. The concluding discussion dealt with the relationship between the global and the local. The second panel, more so

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than the first, clearly demonstrated that the national framework is equally as important as transnational entanglements.

The workshop closed with a panel discussion between Swiss writer ADOLF MUSCHG and German physician and civil-rights activist SEBASTIAN PFLUGBEIL (Chair: STEFAN REINECKE, Berlin). Both speakers commended the pragmatic approach of the Japanese population in dealing with the catastrophe and the determination to cooperate with the government rather than searching for a scapegoat. At the same time, they identified parallels between Europe and Japan in terms of trivialising the disaster's true dimension; the trust in the „controlability" of nuclear energy; and the sluggishness of learning processes.

More than two decades after the end of the Cold War, the nuclear age is far from over and it remains to be seen what global consequences the Fukushima catastrophe will have. The case studies presented during the workshop illustrate the diversity of issues and the significance of the national contexts in which they were debated. Transnational perspectives however become apparent when it comes to analyzing matters of trust and distrust, the approach to dealing with accidents, and the protests against nuclear power. No final conclusion could be drawn as to whether or not these are indicators of a truly interconnected and global history, but the papers raised intriguing questions for future research.

Conference Overview:

Panel One – Cultures: Living with Atomic Energy
Chairs: Nadin Heé (Berlin), Matthias Braun (Berlin)

Elisabeth Röhrlich (Vienna): Peaceful Atoms in the Cold War: The International Atomic Enery Agency's (IAEA) Global Agenda

Stefan Guth (Bern): Futures of the Past: The Soviet Atomic City Shevchenko, 1959-2016

Sibylle Marti (Zurich): Radiophobia in Switzerland

Tim Warneke (Heidelberg): The Self-Destruction of Mankind: The German Peace Movement's Criticism of Society in the 1980s

Commentary: Hartmut Kaelble (Berlin)

Panel Two – Crisis: Societies Dealing with Catastrophes"
Chair: Daniel Hedinger (Freiburg)

Susanne Schregel (Weimar): Nuclear-free Zones

Karena Kalmbach (Florenz): France After Chernobyl

Melanie Arndt (Potsdam): Politics and Society after Chernobyl

Steffi Richter (Leipzig): Fukushima as a Transnational Event

Commentary: Jochen Roose (Berlin)

Discussion – Nuclear Catastrophes and Society
Chair: Stefan Reinecke (taz.die tageszeitung)

Reading by Adolf Muschg and conversation with Sebastian Pflugbeil

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