

Green Capitalism? Exploring the Crossroads of Environmental and Business History

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Can capitalism be green - or at least greener? The fact that the Oxford Handbook on business history does not spend a word on the natural environment goes to show that business and environmental historians don't talk to each other much. The two day conference strove to change this and opened fresh opportunities to link the insights of environmental and business historians. A special objective was to provide historical perspectives on a topic with pressing relevance today, raising questions like: 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 has business or have business organizations advocated government regulation of environmental conditions? When and why did businesses seek to encourage changes in consumer behavior that have environmental implications? How has the globalization of business activity affected the terrain of environmental concerns? How has the location of environmental and resource concerns in local, regional, national or international contexts influenced business initiatives?

Sixteen presenters and five commentators illuminated these questions from different angles over the two days. The papers in session one „Firms as Conservationists?“ reflected on economically challenged conservation attempts and practices in twentieth century America. WILLIAM D. BRYAN (Atlanta), addressed the topic „Corporate Conservation and Conflict: Determining the Ideal Forms of Development for the American South“, re-

vealing how the South's businesses used environmental and sustainable quality concepts as an opportunity to build a new economy based on natural resources. In her talk about „Utilities as Conservationists: The Conundrum of Electrification during the Progressive Era in North America“, JULIE COHN (Houston), elucidated society's clean, green perception of electric energy. As she pointed out, power companies pursued conservationist practices only at certain times, while the history of electrification as a whole underlines the multiple implications of industrial practices. The next speaker DAVID B. COHEN (Waltham), in his presentation on „Capitalism and the Wilderness Idea: The Case of the Great Northern Paper Company“, 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 of the dialog in Maine for the following period. The last presenter of this panel, FRANK UEKÖTTER (Birmingham), asked „How Green was Chemurgy? Biofuel between Chemical Utopias and Corporate Realities in New Deal America“, introducing the audience to the Chemurgy movement. The movement was run by chemists in support of biofuel, who were motivated by a sense of responsibility for business and society alike. Rather than seeing an environmental movement, Uekötter viewed it as an expert movement, strong in its professional convictions, but weak in awareness for 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. The first speaker, AI HISANO (Newark), discussed in her talk „Making Natural: The Color Control of Florida Oranges, 1930s-1950s“ 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 his paper „Energy Hinge? Green Consumerism and the American Energy Scene since 1973“, BRIAN C. BLACK (Altoona), focused on the changing perception of energy consumption after the Oil Crisis of 1973 and argued that awareness of supply

scarcity seems to be making a long term impact on energy markets, particularly in personal transportation. Finally, RACHEL GROSS (Madison), in her paper „Greening Outdoor Recreation in the Age of Plastics“ analyzed the connection between the outdoor 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 the customs of global foreign trade. BENJAMIN R. COHEN (Easton), in his paper „Cottonseed, Oil, and the Environmental Entanglements of a Global Gilded Age Industry“ argued that early food manufacturing industries were shaped by environmental conditions and deliberately sought to configure environmental networks as systems of business interaction and identity. EMILY K. BROCK's (Berlin) 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 last talk on this panel, entitled: „Why American cities go wasting abroad: local political economy and international trade in hazardous waste“, was presented by SIMONE MÜLLER-POHL (Freiburg). She examined the short sightedness of environmental legislation that cities are not always able to meet because they are incapable of providing industry with alternative means of disposing of dangerous waste. In the case study of Philadelphia, this led to the circumstance that a ship carrying toxic waste spent over two years at sea in search of a legal dumping ground, which was finally never discovered.

The first panel on the following day focused on different approaches and challenges of „Firms going green“ and began with DAVID KINKELA (Fredonia), who presented „Hi-

Cone Plastic Six-Pack Rings, Ocean Pollution, and the Challenge of a Global Environmental Problem“. Kinkela told the story of plastic six pack packages as a cheap and easy way to sell soda and beer all over the world, causing huge problems, not so much through production, but because of their lethal effect of entangling and killing marine animals when they enter the ocean. The next speaker, BART ELMORE (Tuscaloosa), with his talk „Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism“, presented the unique corporate structure of the Coca Cola imperium 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. LEIF FREDERICKSON (Charlottesville), talked about „The Rise and Fall of an Ecostar: Environmental Technology Innovation and Marketing as Policy Obstruction“, outlining the car maker Ford's green marketing philosophy. Frederickson suspected the philosophy as being public manipulation - that the firm was more interested in selling the idea of an advanced 'green' technology than the product itself. The last paper on this panel was presented by ANN-KRISTIN BERGQUIST (Umeå), who talked about „Dilemmas of going green: Company strategies in Boliden of 1960-2000“, introducing a case study of a Swedish company dealing with pollution. Bergquist argued that the companies were often in ambiguous situations: whereas handling environmental pollution often requires prompt action, developing appropriate technologies and dealing with economic realities takes time.

The fifth and last conference session, 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 (Munich) pointed out that since the 1970s, cities contracted private companies to collect 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.

HUGH GORMAN's (Houghton), talk on „The Role of Businesses in Constructing Systems of Environmental Governance“ rounded off the conference. Gorman examined adaptive governance, an iterative process towards achieving environmental aims. He hypothesized that regulation can be more influential than producer and consumer decisions, and that maintaining 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 relation between economy and ecology, politics and society as well as the norms and cultures that influence these connections. The fruitful discussions illustrated that environmental and business historians don't always speak the same language and have different judging scales. In the words of one participant: Historians of these two disciplines need to be counselled like couples in order to communicate more effectively. Therefore, the suggestion that both disciplines should improve their communication at future conferences of similar design was broadly appreciated and supported. As frequently stated at the gathering, questions of class, gender and the involved 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 special treat on this sunny October weekend, a spontaneous tour of the du Pont mansion as well as a walk through the park during the lunchtime break was offered and happily accepted.

Conference Overview

Welcoming remarks

Erik Rau (Wilmington, Delaware) / Hartmut Berghoff (Washington, DC)

Session 1: Firms as Conservationists?

William D. Bryan (Atlanta, Georgia), Corporate Conservation and Conflict: Determining the Ideal Forms of Development for the American South

Julie Cohn (Houston, Texas), Utilities as Conservationists: The Conundrum of Electrification during the Progressive Era in North America

David B. Cohen (Waltham, Massachusetts), Capitalism and the Wilderness Idea: The Case of the Great Northern Paper Company

Frank Uekötter (Birmingham, United Kingdom), How Green was Chemurgy? A Movement in Search of Corporations

Comment: Ann Greene (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

Session 2: Consumers' Demands

Ai Hisano (Newark, Delaware), Making Natural: Coloring Florida Oranges, 1930s-1950s

Brian C. Black (Altoona, Pennsylvania), Energy Hinge: Green Consumerism and the Energy Scene since 1973

Rachel Gross (Madison, Wisconsin), Greening Outdoor Recreation in the Age of Plastics

Comment: Adam Rome (Newark, Delaware)

Session 3: Globalization

Benjamin R. Cohen / Matthew Plishka (Easton, Pennsylvania), Cottonseed, Oil, and the Environmental Entanglements of a Global Gilded Age Industry

Emily K. Brock (Berlin, Germany), Naming Commodities: Colonial Power, American Business and the Rebranding of a Tropical Forest Tree in the Philippines

Simone Müller-Pohl (Freiburg, Germany), Why American Cities go Wasting Abroad: Local Political Economy and International Trade in Hazardous Waste

Comment: Yda Schreuder (Newark, Delaware)

Session 4: Firms Going Green

David Kinkela (Fredonia, New York), Hi-Cone Plastic Six-Pack Rings, Ocean Pollution, and the Challenge of a Global Environmental

Problem

Bart Elmore (Tuscaloosa, Alabama), Towards a History of Sustainable Business?: What the Coca-Cola Company Can Tell Us about the Ecological Causes of Corporate Restructuring

Leif Fredrickson (Charlottesville, Virginia), The Rise and Fall of an Ecostar: Environmental Technology Innovation and Marketing as Policy Obstruction

Ann-Kristin Bergquist (Umeå, Sweden), Dilemmas of Going Green: Company Strategies in the Swedish Mining Company Boliden 1960-2000

Comment: Regina Lee Blaszczyk (Leeds, United Kingdom)

Session 5: Governance

Roman Köster (Munich, Germany), Private Companies and the Recycling of Household Waste in West Germany, 1965-1990

Hugh Gorman (Houghton, Michigan), The Role of Businesses in Constructing Systems of Environmental Governance

Comment: Brian Balogh (Charlottesville, Virginia)

Conference Summary

Christine Meisner Rosen (Berkley, California)

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