

### **Aquatic Histories in Transnational and Global Perspectives**

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**Bericht von:** Jalnar Mahmoud, Institut für Osteuropäische Geschichte und Landeskunde, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

„Water“, both inland and oceanic, has long been a key issue not only amongst environmental historians. Certainly it can be described as a „threatened order“ in that its shape and make-up as well as its health is constantly in flux, governed by an ever-changing interplay of forces, actors and processes. The goal then, of the two-day international conference „Aquatic Histories in Transnational and Global Perspectives“ held in Tübingen on 6 and 7 October 2016, was to investigate this complex pattern of oceans, lakes and rivers not only as resources, but also as actors tied to local and global developments which reflect human and natural influences, thus playing the part of both a barrier and bridge. This conference was organized by members of two major research associations: the DFG/ANR-project EcoGlobReg and Tübingen University's Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) 923 „Threatened Order – Societies under Stress“.

The conference was split into two groups, the first of which presenting about oceans and seas and the second group following up on inland waters. As part of the first panel concerning oceans as „Hunting and Fishing Grounds“, FRANZISKA TORMA (Munich) emphasized the part animals play as historical agents in a broader sense. Transnational creatures that they are, they travel between regions and even scientific epistemologies, influencing not only human views and decisions on the oceans, but often even their survival. Thus, they render a traditional anthropocentric take on oceanic history questionable at the least.

In contrast to that, MARY CARMEL FINLEY (Corvallis) took up a slightly more con-

ventional stance in her presentation on Soviet post-war fishing and whaling, highlighting how government subsidies quickly gave rise to an impossibly strong industry whose mismanagement led to global overfishing of fish species that were not even adequately researched yet. Finley described how local developments, largely spurred on by the need to industrialize and feed the country, quickly transcended national boundaries and initiated the formation of the EEZs and global laws on ocean management in general.

The second panel largely concentrated on deep sea exploration, starting with HELEN ROZWADOWSKI (Avery Point) and her presentation on the deep sea frontier. She explained her take on how a primarily American cultural conception, namely the frontier metaphor, quickly spread out internationally and influenced the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Her theory is that the notion of a common heritage of the seas that was so essential to UNCLOS is derived at least in part from the optimism of the ocean boosters and the belief that the ocean could be brought under control, essentially „farmed“, by those strong enough to do so.

PEDER ROBERTS (Stockholm) followed up on this cultural diatribe by drawing attention to the complex political networks deep sea exploration was dependent on, condensing his views by means of one particular object: the Piccard brothers' bathyscaphe. His approach poses the question whether history would reveal entirely new facets if viewed from the perspective of a certain technology or platform. Certainly the bathyscaphe has lived through enough shifting paradigms to justify further investigation: be it the change from an older, „monarchic“ form of nationalism tied to concrete individuals to a more recent one centred around institutions, or the changing role of the human element in exploration at the end of the privateer age. Interestingly, both Rozwadowski and Roberts drew parallels between undersea exploration and the space race as highly prestige-driven ventures in the eye of the public, exploited as a demonstration of national power.

Following up on the political analysis, SIMONE MÜLLER (Munich) talked about the London Dumping Convention of 1972, focus-

ing on the intersections of political and environmental interests. She argued that the dumping of 22,000 tons of nerve gas rockets produced for use in the Vietnam war in 1970 provided the stimulus to finally pass one of the first pieces of modern international environmental legislation. Müller emphasized that the convention was as much a response to growing environmental concerns, as it was a political stance against the war in Vietnam and contextualized it as part of the „Stockholm success story“ and the warming of Cold War relations.

JOHANNA SACKEL (Paderborn) in turn focused on the complex interplay of historical agents in the making of UNCLOS and the related „Pacem in Maribus“ (PiM) conference. She posed the question over the relevance of individual actors by referencing Elisabeth Mann Borghese and the successful establishment of PiM as an „epistemic community“, a think tank operating parallel to UNCLOS and made up of the same participants for the most part, however, within a much freer environment. Sackel concluded that precisely this environment, somewhat unconnected to the „profit-oriented“ sphere of transnational politics, could encourage such notions of the „freedom of the sea“, the „common heritage of mankind“ and a new world order for the oceans.

As a textbook example of a sea caught between conflicting regulations, institutions and even political systems, the Baltic Sea received particular attention by both TUOMAS RÄSÄNEN (Turku) and RAPHAEL SCHULTE-KELLINGHAUS (Tübingen). Examining the scientific scene in Finland, Räsänen brought attention to the severe pollution and the disruption in the ecosystem brought on by anthropogenic eutrophication and how, even though sufficient knowledge was available in the 1950s, nothing was done to combat it until after 1980. He attributes the lack in action to disruptions in the circulation of that knowledge, whether by outdated concepts of the „self-healing sea“ ingrained in the scientific community, the focus on economy over ecology, or the general apathy towards marine environmental health displayed in communist countries.

Likewise, Schulte-Kellinghaus highlighted

the gap between knowledge and political action. He turned his eye to the Visby-Conferences and their instrumentalization in the struggle for recognition between East and West Germany. While West Germany initially refused to sign any agreement that would accept the DDR as an equally sovereign nation, growing medial outrage and diplomatic tension as well as the increasing level of pollution eventually forced actors to come to an agreement. It became clear, however, that it did not sufficiently solve the environmental problems – any regulation concerning the coast-side industry went unaddressed due to territorial quarrelling, and the polluted state of the Baltic Sea remains unchanged even now.

UWE LÜBKEN's (Munich) keynote on the role of rivers as actors set up the second block on inland waters with an entertaining presentation on the watershed as political and social place. Lübken explained that until now, rivers were mostly seen as passive victims, as contested space that is being fought over and unavoidably transformed by industrialization and governization. Recently, however, rivers are assigned much more agency as environmental systems that are at least partly incomprehensible and thus, uncontrollable. He emphasized their role as „places of memory“, shaping the social consciousness of nearby residents, and pointed out their transnational nature: As a social space transcending borders, different societies with different environmental regulations treat their part of the river differently, creating unique, highly dynamic environments.

Such a transnational aspect is also the focus of MATTHEW EVENDEN (Vancouver) who examined Craig Colten's general claim that river basins should be considered, at least partly, to be urban territories.<sup>1</sup> Evenden explored the rivers Columbia and St. Lawrence on the US-Canadian border, both featuring multiple urban sites and international river basins, to test the limits of this particular conceptualization. While he principally agrees with Colten's theory, he raises doubts as to its generalizability: In the area of multiple com-

<sup>1</sup> Vgl. Craig Colten, *Fluid Geographies. Urbanizing River Basins*, in: Stephane Castonguay / Matthew Evenden (eds.), *Urban Rivers. Remaking Rivers, Cities and Space in Europe and North America*, Pittsburgh 2012, pp. 201–218.

peting cities as well as conflicting federal, regional or even national interests, Colton's theory that river basin planning is realized primarily by one city cannot be backed.

EVA JAKOBSSON (Stavanger) meanwhile, relocated the discussion back into Scandinavian territory with her presentation on the Swedish-Norwegian „water treaty“ over the shared rivers Göta and Törne. She described that to cancel out each other's weaknesses (Sweden's downstream position and Norway's weak watershed), both countries engaged in a beneficial cooperation by replacing national authorities with independent institutions. She closed with the question whether, taking into account the differing political conditions, national and border-crossing rivers can really be compared. The discussions underscored her point and called for a „comparative history of rivers“.

DAVID STRADLING (Cincinnati) took up the question that had been at the core of many of the previous presentations: How does science influence environmental policy making? His research into the dredging phenomenon leads him to the conclusion that sometimes, scientific knowledge can actually hinder political action. In the case of dredging, for uninformed non-scientists, the bad consequences are self-evident and visible. In contrast, most scientific studies are in fact inconclusive: Dredging is a very site-specific phenomenon for which there are hardly any general rules on which regulations could base on. In the great environmental surge in the 1960s, public discontent finally forced policy-makers become active. In this case, it's the public discourse that informed the scientific one, not vice versa.

The interplay between science, administration and environmental activists was also the topic of LAURENT COUMEL (Paris), who recounts the history of Lake Seliger, a tourist resort near Moscow. Plagued by forest cuttings, overfishing and attempts to chemically clean the lake, its condition deteriorated steadily, until 1961 the idea came up to turn it into a National Park. Environmentalists used the competition with the West and the environmental turn in the U.S. as a conscious strategy to force Soviet policy makers to act in their interests. They attempted to nationalize Seliger

similar to the Baikal, and thus tried to reframe an environmental question as a cultural one. However, this movement yielded little but so-called state greenwashing: Lakeshores were kept clean for a few decades, but the underlying economic processes, which led to their decline, weren't changed.

The final panel on „Rivers and Soils, Irrigation and Salinization“ started with a presentation by DANIEL ROTHENBURG (Tübingen) on irrigated agriculture in Australia's largest and only major river system, the Murray-Darling-Basin. He depicted it as a „state of ecological disaster“, caused by over-extraction and salinity. Massive hydro-engineering projects with little regard to environmental consequences were realized as a drought struck in 1967/8 and cemented the Murray's status as a „regulated river“ in the public's mind, thus shifting the blame and responsibility for its wellbeing to policy-makers and engineers. Today, salinity remains a driving force for Australian policy-making, and hydro-engineering has turned, in the full sense of High Modernism, into a point of national pride.

TIMM SCHÖNFELDER (Tübingen), in contrast, focussed on the Kuban River Region with regards to hydrotechnological developments in the 20th century, showing the complex interconnectedness of multiple actors engaged in agrarian and environmental organization: indigenous, non-native, and transnational; some privately funded, some government-sponsored. The varying levels of knowledge between these actors created problems not only when in cooperation with each other (e.g. with the Soviet cotton affair), it created vast gaps in expertise when they succeeded their predecessor's responsibilities: such holes in knowledge caused structures and plans to quietly fall apart until public criticism exploded.

RAPHAËL JOZAN (Paris / Tashkent) took a closer look at the structures laying at the basis of such policy-making, namely simulation and optimization models for water planning in Central Asia. Examining the Aral Sea Basin and correlating it to current research, he found that the models currently used in political decision-making are not representative of the true state of affairs anymore. There

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are significant differences visible in so-called „overflows“: existing crop that does not show up in government statistics or in the many expert and scientific studies about the region. Thus Jozan poses the question on the viability of such models and the way in which they are created, providing an important stimulus for recertifying seemingly secure sources.

The conference proved to be an important forum for exchange between ocean, river and lake experts, accentuating current discussions amongst historians. What are the structures of knowledge, how and when does it pass into action? How do we account for the „uncertainty“ of historical processes and actors to avoid circular reasoning? The discussion of the different areas of interest, transcending national borders, showed a great deal of interconnections between global and local developments and actors. A closer look upon this rich interplay of forces revealed the flaws in a solely anthropocentric view on water history. Issues like unclear terminology (as in: what defines a river?) were highlighted and important impulses were given for a comparative history of rivers, lakes and oceans. In many ways, the interconnectedness of all these hydro-worlds was addressed time and again, culminating in the question whether all aquatic histories should be merged together or whether categories like exploration and domestications still apply too differently to allow for a clean meld.

### Conference Overview:

#### *Introduction*

Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen) / Marc Elie (Paris)

#### *Panel 1 – Hunting and Fishing Grounds*

Chair: Guido Hausmann (Regensburg)

Franziska Torma (München): The Ocean as Biosphere. Animal History and the Sea

Mary Carmel Finley (Corvallis): „Gentlemen, the fish await.“ The Post-War Expansion of Soviet Fishing and Whaling, 1945–1976

#### *Panel 2 – Undersea and Deep Ocean*

Chair: Fabian Fechner (Hagen)

Helen M. Rozwadowski (Avery Point): Undersea Frontier. Science, Technology and the Legacy of the Post-World War II Perception of

the Ocean

Peder Roberts (Stockholm): The Politics of Deep Sea Exploration in the Early Cold War. The Case of the Bathyscaphe Trieste

#### *Panel 3 – International Conventions and Conferences*

Chair: Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen)

Simone Müller (München): The London Dumping Convention of 1972. Mapping the Cold War in Marine Protection

Johanna Sackel (Paderborn): Who Owns the Ocean's Treasures? The Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea as an Arena of Global Resource Conflicts

#### *Panel 4 – The Baltic Sea*

Chair: Karsten Brüggemann (Tallin)

Tuomas Räsänen (Turku): Alarmists vs. Sceptics. The Debate Over Anthropogenic Eutrophication Among Finnish Marine Scientists

Raphael Schulte-Kellinghaus (Tübingen): The Baltic Sea. Transnational Sphere of Knowledge and Interaction

#### *Keynote*

Uwe Lübken (München): Rivers as Actors?

#### *Panel 5 – Rivers: Transnational Perspectives*

Chair: Martin Schmid (Klagenfurt/Wien)

Matthew Evenden (Vancouver): Basin Planning and the Power of Cities. The Confounding Role of International Borders

Eva Jakobsson (Stavanger): Scandinavian Transnational Water Histories during the 20th Century

#### *Panel 6 – Lakes: Resources and Pollution*

Chair: Melanie Arndt (Regensburg)

David Stradling (Cincinnati): Dredging in the Age of Ecology. Pursuing a Policy of Pollution Containment in the Great Lakes

Laurent Coumel (Paris): On the Soviet lakeshore. Scientific and Technical Transfers and Circulations in Lake Seliger's Exploitation and Protection, 1960-1980s

#### *Panel 7 – Rivers and Soils, Irrigation and Salinization*

Chair: Ewald Frie (Tübingen)

Daniel Rothenburg (Tübingen): Dreams Turning to Salt? Australian Hydro-Modernism Faces the Challenges of Salinity

Timm Schönfelder (Tübingen): The Industrialization of Irrigation. Spheres of Knowledge in the Kuban River Region

Raphaël Jozan (Paris/Tashkent): Modelling the Aral Sea Basin. History of Transnational Hydro-Expertise Networks in the Late 20th Century

*Concluding Remarks*

Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen)

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