

## 'Playing with Scales' in Environmental History

**Veranstalter:** Ewald Frie, Dept. of Modern History, University of Tübingen; Daniel Rothenburg, Collaborative Research Center 923 'Threatened Order – Societies under Stress', University of Tübingen

**Datum, Ort:** 11.04.2018–12.04.2018, Tübingen

**Bericht von:** Adrian Paulik, Fachbereich Geschichtswissenschaft, Universität Tübingen

„Environmental history frequently makes more sense on a regional or global scale than it does on a national one. It uniquely bridges planetary and deeply local perspectives, staking a claim for histories that are bound intimately to place and also embrace the natural world, histories that are deeply attentive to human and biological parochialism.“<sup>1</sup>

Studies in Environmental History are exceedingly faced with the challenge of considering different scales that influence their object of research. By taking this as the point of departure, the workshop "Playing with Scales' in Environmental History", which was held in Tübingen on 11 and 12 April 2018, aimed at discussing the benefits and limitations of scaling and scales to frame research questions. Vice versa, it was also asked what lessons could be learned from the participants' empirical case studies for the concept of scales. What are the links between the local empirical realities of the research projects with global frames of relevance and the big narratives of the Environmental History of the 20th century? And does the recognition of environmental factors crucially challenge the traditional scales that are commonly used in historiography, especially the nation-state? This is a particularly interesting question, since these traditional scales do not necessarily „exist along ecologically sensible parameters.“<sup>2</sup> As DANIEL ROTHENBURG (Tübingen) emphasized in his conceptual introduction, scales should be seen as empirical objects rather than ontological entities that exist a priori. Therefore, scaling is an influential endeavour: „The fact that scaling involves vantage points and the positioning of actors with respect to such vantage points means that there are no ideologically neutral scales.“<sup>3</sup> Re-

searchers should thus pay attention to both their own scaling processes as well as to the question how the actors themselves scale their worlds.

FREDERIK SCHULZE (Münster) presented two case studies on Latin American dam building in the second half of the 20th century: the Guri dam in Venezuela and the Tucuruí dam in Brazil. He dealt with dam construction within the framework of Latin American developmental policy and perceived it as a field of interaction between technical, social, economic and environmental aspects. While these dams were locally bound infrastructures on the one hand, they nonetheless were national projects and played their part in the „global production of knowledge“ on the other. Therefore, Latin American agency in the global production of the knowledge of dam construction could be traced, even during the Cold War. To fully understand the concrete local practices and actors, it was indispensable to look at national discourses and governments, ideas of development and policy patterns in the Latin American world region, and global actors in developmental policy. This approach linked the actors on different spatial scales and offered the possibility of their intellectual integration into a consistent narrative. This analysis countered the classical narrative of Western technology that spread through developmental countries with negative impacts.

DANIEL ROTHENBURG addressed the question how to combine a grand scale narrative with specific local empirical realities. He focused on 'Salinity Action Groups' that emerged as local self-help during the 1970s in rural Victoria, Australia. They were founded to cope with social and environmental problems which were caused by increasing soil

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Griffiths, How Many Trees Make a Forest? Cultural Debates about Vegetation Change in Australia; in: Australian Journal of Botany 50 (2002), pp. 378-379.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Wakild, The Challenge of Scale in Environmental History: A Small Meditation on a Large Matter, in: Markus Hall / Patrick Kupper (eds.), Crossing Mountains: The Challenges of Doing Environmental History, Rachel Carson Center Perspectives 4 (2014), pp. 19-29, here p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> E. Summerson Carr / Michael Lempert, Introduction. Pragmatics of Scale, in E. Summerson Carr / Michael Lempert (eds.), Scale. Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life, Oakland 2016, pp. 1-21, here. p. 3.

---

and water salinity linked to irrigation practices in the Murray-Darling basin. His intention was to explore the history of these local groups against the background of the „Ecological Revolution“ that emerged around 1970.<sup>4</sup> Rothenburg argued that these activists were highly receptive to global environmental discourses and perceived themselves to some extent as part of a global movement – despite their limited contacts to urban environmental groups in Australia. This helps explain the Salinity Action Groups’ promotion of environmental education and ecological thinking even though they were themselves deeply entangled with the irrigation industry and the government, and pursued individual economic interests.

ALEXEY SOBISEVICH (Moscow) discussed the role of nature preservation in the Soviet Union. In the 1970s, in addition to classical nature reserves that primarily aimed at protecting endemic species, a second type of reserves was established. In those specially protected biosphere reserves, any non-scientific human activity was strongly forbidden so that scientists could carry out ecological research more freely. As such, the Central Black Earth Biosphere Reserve was created on the territory of the grass steppe in 1978. Sobisevich traced the interplay between the Soviet state level and local realities by taking a close look at the researchers that were involved in the reserve’s monitoring. It appears that the creation of biosphere reserves was an important instrument for both international ecological cooperation and Soviet ecological propaganda.

Returning to the history of dam building, another set of thoughts was brought into the discussion by BENJAMIN BRENDEL (Giessen). Along with the construction of the first big dams in the United States and the Soviet Union from the late 1920s onwards, iconic pictures emerged. Photographers like Margaret Bourke-White created images of the technical enthusiasm that was identified with these large-scale projects and established a set of visual arguments. Pictures of poverty and dry, cracked soil were used to promote dam construction and irrigation as a means for national progress and development. By being converted into images, specific objects

were separated from their localities and became something more abstract with the possibility to travel. While national promoters of the idea of dam construction made use of those images, representatives of a cultural avantgarde that were connected internationally contributed to the establishment of these images as meaningful on a global scale.

TIMM SCHÖNFELDER (Tübingen) focused his talk on the role of nature in Soviet technopolitics. Drought, famine, and food insecurity were the driving forces that influenced political decisions concerning hydroinfrastructures and agropolitics throughout the 20th century. In his case study, which focused on the Kuban River region in the Northern Caucasus, he showed how scientists, engineers, politicians, and farmers were intertwined in different kinds of networks reaching through all levels of the Soviet state. He argued that the central issue with the regime’s solutions to ecological and social demands was its inability to adapt to the specific local characteristics of the various agricultural regions. Schönfelder deconstructed the „agromeliorative complex“ across different scales – spatial as well as temporal, cultural, and organizational. Thus, he structured his research in a way that allowed him to draw interconnections between simultaneous yet isolated events, using scaling as an analytical tool that framed his perspective.

In the workshop’s final presentation, MUSTAFA COŞKUN (Tübingen) offered insights into his case study on agriculture across the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border in Central Asia’s Fergana Valley. Varying processes of regime change in the post-Soviet era led to increasing differences in the political economies and national identities on both sides of the border. Accordingly, rice cultivation in the respective border zone provided an ideal frame to explore overlapping and crosscutting of spatial, economic and organizational scales. Coşkun drew attention to how different practices influenced people and the environment. He eventually proposed considering „scales as temporal orders that do not only inform but are also shaped by the scalar practices of social actors.“

---

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Radkau, *The Age of Ecology. A Global History*, Cambridge 2014.

During the workshop, scaling proved to be a useful heuristic tool that brought together historians with different regional and temporal foci. It became evident that the 'question of scale' could be posed on two different levels: within the frame of analytical inquiry and as part of the self-perception of the actors. Regarding to the former, the selection and prioritization of scales by historians have the potential to fundamentally change narratives. Paying attention to the latter, in contrast, appeared to significantly increase the ability to make sense of the actors' individual behaviour. Yet it became evident that the local, national and global as traditionally established scales are still of huge significance, especially regarding the national level, as all other scales seemed to be derived from it. As Daniel Rothenburg put it in his concluding remarks: global is what is beyond the national, local is what is influenced by it. This conclusion, however, is affected by the selection of case studies from the 20th century that deal with infrastructural projects which are difficult to conceive without the power and resources of modern states. After all, the task of creating scales that best capture their objects without neglecting the significance of these traditional frames of reference will remain a constant challenge for environmental historians.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Introduction*

Ewald Frie (Tübingen) / Daniel Rothenburg (Tübingen)

Chair: Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen)

Frederik Schulze (Münster): Hydroelectric Centers in the Periphery. Local, National and Global Perspectives on the Guayana and the Amazon

Daniel Rothenburg (Tübingen): Local Matters, Global Trends. Environmentalism in Rural Communities of Victoria, Australia

Alexey Sobisevich (Moscow): Scaling the Black Earth. Nature Preservation in the Soviet Union

Chair: Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (Tübingen)

Benjamin Brendel (Gießen): Traveling Imag-

inations: Visual Rhetorics of Arid Soil, Dam Building and Salinization

Timm Schönfelder (Tübingen): Ubiquitous Scaling in Soviet Ruralities. On the Role of Nature in Technopolitics

Mustafa Coşkun (Tübingen): Unboxing Scales: Rivers, Borders and Politics in the Fergana Valley

##### *Final Discussion*

Ewald Frie (Tübingen) / Daniel Rothenburg (Tübingen)

Tagungsbericht 'Playing with Scales' in *Environmental History*. 11.04.2018–12.04.2018, Tübingen, in: H-Soz-Kult 11.06.2018.