

The Colonial Transformation of the Americas: Environment and Society, 1492 to the present

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The organizer, ELEONORA ROHLAND (Bielefeld), welcomed international scholars to the Workshop dealing with the long-term interaction between humans and the environment, and the following social and environmental transformation of the Americas and the Caribbean. In her welcome speech, Rohland explained that the idea for the workshop and an informal interdisciplinary research group was brought into being by University of Bielefeld's book project and the collaboration with William O'Reilly from the University of Cambridge. After the first workshop two years ago at the University of Cambridge, the group was happy to welcome new presenters.

Researching adaptations and transitions in coastal setting, CRAIG COLTEN (Baton Rouge, LA) had his main focus on Louisiana. Beginning with the adaptations of the first European settlers, he showed that there are five different stages of adaptation: environmental adaptation, adaptation in resource management and technological, social and cultural adaptation. Concluding, that going through all these stages of adaptation can lead to a transition, another problem arises from modelling long-term transitions. According to Colten, the use of modelling means that one can have transitions by design. Therefore, he asserted, that modelling long-term transitions fails to explain cultural differences and is unable to account for unpredictable social and environmental contingences, because it seems as if adaptation is only possible by observing nature and adapting to it and as a result leads to a transition.

Dealing with structural inequality in Latin America, OLAF KALTMEIER (Bielefeld) pre-

sented his current book project with his lecture by expounding, that the term „re-feudalization“ is an alternative draft to the term „post-“ in history. Starting with images of „re-feudalization“, like shopping malls in colonial style, continuing with the „re-feudalization“ in the economy by showing that the private debt is increasing and that there is extreme wealth on the one hand and extreme poverty on the other hand, Kaltmeier drafted the image of the elimination of the public sphere in Latin American states by right wing billionaires that he calls „Robber Barons“, whose economic success is heavily linked to unequal distribution of wealth as well as the illegal sector. In conclusion Kaltmeier displayed different regional patterns of „re-feudalization“ that are related to colonial times, and which he regards as counter identity to the indigenous identity, based on whiteness and colonial heritage.

Focusing on mining, historical geographer HEIDI SCOTT (Amherst, MA) took the participants in her lecture to the underground, and discussed ideas of the underground, which were present in the past and asked how colonial mining was connected to questions of morality. She researches in which ways European and Creole narratives about fertility and agricultural productivity in the Andes were imaginatively intertwined with colonial endeavours to exploit mineral wealth. Quoting Spanish colonial writers such as Juan Ignacio Molina and Francisco de Serra Canals, Scott depicted the dualism between agriculture and mining in their writings. Nevertheless, Scott stated, that the vision of the Andes is defined by subterranean richness, although connections between surface and underground changed over time.

With the landing of Pedro Álvares Cabral in Port Seguro in April 1500 the literal society of the Europeans clashed with the oral culture of the indigenous inhabitants of the New World. DIOGO DE CARVALHO CABRAL (Rio de Janeiro) illustrated the conflict between literate Europeans vs. illiterate Indians and the power of literacy, which supported the overwriting of the indigenous culture. Knowing, that writing and literacy is culturally rooted, every part of the social and economic life but as well the environment has been covered

with writings of European colonists. Having the supreme authority over legal charters and as well over historical writing, Diogo de Carvalho Cabral stated, that literacy was one of the main aspects for a socio-environmental change in early modern Brazil.

One major issue in today's historical environmental research is the era of the Anthropocene. Examining the problems of the current definition of the Anthropocene HELGE WENDT (Berlin) argued for a look at the Anthropocene from another angle. The consensual dating of the new epoch by the Anthropocene Working Group starts in the beginning of the 1950s. Wendt argued that this perspective is Eurocentric, and that the determined timeframe, as well as the exclusion of Latin America in doing research on the Anthropocene, is inadequate. Reasoning that every human interaction, like the extraction of natural resources, had and has an impact on nature, Wendt concluded that what he calls the „proto-Anthropocene“ should be an important point of research and that there is no argument for excluding certain groups of people or landscapes.

ELEONORA ROHLAND (Bielefeld) presented her current and still running book project. Her main focus lies on the parallel transformation of human societies and natural environments in the Caribbean and on the close entanglement of those two spheres through already existing indigenous and imported agricultural practices. For Rohland, agriculture is the main point where humans become entangled with nature. Dealing with the famine on Hispaniola (La Isabela) from 1494 - 96, which is portrayed in several of the early Spanish sources (Las Casas, Fernandez de Oviedo, d'Anghiera), her main hypothesis draws a connection between the early famine and climate anomalies in that time, combining archaeological, historical and climatological data to underline her research thesis.

JOYCE CHAPLIN (Cambridge, MA) presented her newest research about resource conservation during the little ice age (late 1300 to early 1800) in North America. Choosing Benjamin Franklin as a reference point and as an „Enlightenment Icon for Conservation“, Chaplin depicts his explorations in climate research and his improvements in heat-

ing houses and thereby underlines Franklin's role for conservation in the 18th century, not only in the new, but also in the old world.

FRANZ MAUELSHAGEN (Duisburg) presented his newest research project in collaboration with the Potsdam institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), dealing with the reasons for the 1610 low in the CO₂ record. In his lecture Franz Mauelshagen shows, that his actual focus lies on the anthropogenic influence on preindustrial climate change. Including de- and repopulation into the view of the Anthropocene and climate change, Mauelshagen has to deal with the problem of getting reliable data from historical demography and tries to overcome this obstacle with a bottom-up approach, collecting information from various sources. Apart from historical demography, Mauelshagen focuses on Archaeology and Climatology. Since the research project has been running for only six weeks, there are no conclusive results yet.

LEON ENRIQUE ÁVILA (San Cristobal de las Casas) took the participants of the conference on a voyage to Latin American oil palm plantations. By depicting the extractive system of Latin American land use, Ávila showed that problems from planting oil palms do not only emerge for the environment, but also in the displacement of food products and a potential weakening of socioeconomic and political structures with detrimental working conditions on the plantations and the linking of companies to paramilitary forces.

The conference ended with Olaf Kaltmeier's presentation of the Maria Sybilla Merian Center for advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS), which is dealing with transdisciplinary, Latin American perspectives on the subject of Crisis. After this presentation, the participants met for a closed group discussion, deciding they will continue their cooperation in various forms.

Conference Overview:

Eleonora Rohland (Bielefeld University): Welcome and Intro

Craig Colten (Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge): Adaptive Transitions: The Long-Term Perspective on Humans in Changing Coastal Settings.

Olaf Kaltmeier (Bielefeld University): The Refeudalization of Economy: Extrativism, Landlords and Robber Barons in the 21st Century.

Heidi Scott (University of Massachusetts, Amherst): Between Complementarity and Conflict: Agriculture, Mining, and Imaginative Geographies of Fertility in Colonial Spanish America.

Diogo Cabral (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, Rio de Janeiro): Overwriting the Land: Alphabetic Literacy and Socio-Environmental Change in Early Brazil.

Helge Wendt (Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science, Berlin): Factors to Include (Colonial) Latin America into the Proto-Anthropocene. Environment, Extraction and Industrialization.

Eleonora Rohland (Bielefeld University): Unfamiliar Environments: The 1494-96 Famine on Hispaniola – „Indigenous Ploy“ or Climate Anomaly?

William O'Reilly (University of Cambridge): Migration in the Atlantic World. CANCELED

Joyce Chaplin (Harvard University, Cambridge MA): La Stufa di Pensilvania: How North America was an Unlikely Enlightenment Icon for Conservation.

Franz Mauelshagen (Center for Global Cooperation Research, Duisburg): Extinction of Indigenous Populations, Reforestation, and the 1610 Low in CO₂.

Leon Enrique Ávila (Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas, San Cristobal de las Casas): A History of Environmental Collapse: Oil Palm in Mesoamerica.

Closed Group Discussion of Funding Formats and Handbook Project idea

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