
Conference Report

Political Ecology

Organizer: Sven Reichardt, University of Konstanz; Irmtraud Huber, University of Konstanz; Sebastian Koos, University of Konstanz; Timo Müller, University of Konstanz; Marie Muschalek, University of Konstanz

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Report by: Daniel Rothenburg, Zeitgeschichte, Universität Konstanz

In recent years, the “Environmental Humanities” have developed into an innovative and productive field. Embracing a multiplicity of approaches from the Humanities and Social Sciences, it is concerned with – broadly speaking – nature-society relations. Under this umbrella, (environmental) history, literature (particularly ecocriticism), philosophy, media studies, sociology, human geography, law, and economics contribute to an understanding of the environmental dimension of the human condition with a particular concern for the present and future challenges.

Assembling many different scholarly approaches, each with their own traditions and concepts, the field of “Environmental Humanities” obviously comes with challenges but also with great potential for interdisciplinary collaboration. To realize it, finding common themes beyond the shared interest in the environment and developing a common language are crucial. Therefore, the aim of the workshop on Environmental Humanities, held at the University of Konstanz on 14 and 15 September 2023, was to bring together a diverse group of scholars interested in questions about environment and society with the mid-term aim to build a sustainable network as a base for future collaboration, particularly within the region of southern Germany and Switzerland.

As a starting point for discussion, the organizers chose the concept of Political Ecology. Defined as a field which interrogates nature-society relations, “Political Ecology” focuses on power relations that intersect and affect the access to natural resources to reveal disparities and injustices in the distribution of costs and benefits. Choosing this firmly established term as point of departure had a number of advantages: On the one hand, it was sufficiently broad to accommodate the fields which were represented at the workshop – history, literature, and sociology. On the other hand, it gave the workshop a decidedly political edge with its focus on the political dimension of human-environment interactions, and their multiple, interconnected repercussions. “[A]ny tug on the strands of the global web of human-environment linkages reverberates throughout the system as a whole”^[1], affecting the political, social, and economic spheres. This inevitably produces winners and losers and shapes power relations within human societies. Therefore, the papers presented stressed the inherently political character of environmental change, technology, discourses and imaginaries, and environmental knowledge.

In the introduction, the interdisciplinary team of organizers, SVEN REICHARDT (Konstanz), TIMO MÜLLER (Konstanz), and SEBASTIAN KOOS (Konstanz), discussed the approach of Political Ecology from the vantage point of their respective fields. Reichardt outlined the core themes of environmental history in recent times, highlighting a long-standing interest in the accelerating ecological

change in the twentieth century. More recently, the construction of space by ecological factors and deep time perspectives have gained increasing attention. Among the most promising developments was examining the nexus of environmental degradation and imperialism, as exemplified in the work of Corey Ross^[2], which continues and deepens earlier insights on the imperial origins of ecological modernization by Richard Grove.^[3] Further, environmental justice and intersectionalist approaches provided methodological innovations for future directions in research. Sebastian Koos turned to the field of environmental sociology and discussed research on the relevance of environmental movements in social movement theory. In line with the overarching theme of the workshop, Koos particularly stressed the need of the Environmental Humanities to develop politically relevant arguments. Timo Müller then focused on recent discussions in ecocriticism. Present concerns were, inter alia, representations of nature and metaphors of natural phenomena and their uses. Müller emphasized the high relevance of environmental justice matters and diagnosed a new focus on global issues with a “sense of planet”.

In the first section on water, with papers by environmental historians COREY ROSS (Basel) and DANIEL ROTHENBURG (Konstanz), the intimate entanglements between power relations and the control over water resources were discussed. Water, Ross argued, is an ideal lens to study political ecologies: who controls its flows and uses reflects and produces social power, status, and hierarchies of knowledge. One central factor was ownership of water resources. The efforts of European colonial states to “modernize” the cities of empire through control over water entailed attempts at a commodification of water, a good which previously had been free or cheaply available. However, implementation of globally distributed technologies and the application of knowledge and expertise was hindered by a lack of familiarity of planners and engineers with local environments. Local populations often responded to “enclosures” of water resources by tacit non-compliance with rules of distribution or even water meter tampering and theft. Colonial legacies were still prevalent today. One central issue was who had access to water infrastructures and who had not. Water scarcities were seldom caused by shortage of supply. Instead, Ross stressed, distribution and power were crucial.

Daniel Rothenburg touched on many of the same themes in his paper by presenting the case study of Australia’s agricultural heartland, the Murray-Darling Basin. Since 1968, control over water resources, he argued, underwent drastic changes due to over-irrigation and escalating soil degradation – chiefly salinization – in the most valuable regions of the Basin. Salinization became a key reason to dismantle the state-owned and operated water authorities – both to the proponents of neoliberalism and sustainability. Water, once intended as a resource for nation-building, heavily subsidized and declared common to the people, was commodified. By giving water a market price, both economically efficient and environmentally sustainable use were supposed to be achieved. Much like in the former colonial cities, water shortage in today’s Australia is chiefly a result of distribution and control of the resource.

In the following section on environmental justice, SEBASTIAN KOOS (Konstanz) and ALEXA WEIK VON MOSSNER (Klagenfurt) analyzed contemporary conflicts about environmental issues. With a view from quantitative sociology, Koos posed a somewhat provocative question: does climate protest matter? Does

it really affect public support for climate policies? Furthermore, Koos discussed whether radical action helps or hinders this effect. Crucially, he used “radical” in the sense of what is perceived as such by the participants of his sample, without presupposing a normative definition of the concept. Even civil disobedience, he concluded, was perceived as quite radical and, furthermore, more “radical” tactics and demands decreased support for groups and political demands, even those perceived as “modest”. The key question was how public attitudes translated into an actual change of policies on climate change.

Alexa Weik von Mossner took a different approach to the topic with a view from American Studies. Focusing on food justice narratives by people of color in the USA, she considered writing as a form of activism in struggles over food sovereignty. Her talk explored stories about urban gardening and culinary resistance in various media ranging from essay collections, practical guides, and cookbooks to blogs and documentary films. Mossner paid particular attention to the allocation of narrative agency, highlighting forms of transmedia storytelling that allow individuals and their communities to speak for themselves. Stories about these practices against unjust access to food led to emotional responses by audiences and consequently resilience. Their function was not limited to mere self-representation, rather such stories proved useful to build group coherence and identity, and therefore were essential to the causes they championed.

The following section, combining presentations from history and sociology, highlighted the crucial role of knowledge, scientific expertise, and the politics of science for nature-society relations. DANIEL EGGSTEIN (Konstanz) presented his work on ecological research institutes in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s. These, he argued, challenged existing epistemic practices and knowledge production. Alternative institutions like the “Volkshochschule Wyhl”, grown out of the anti-nuclear power protests in south-western Germany, the Freiburg “Öko-Institut”, or the Heidelberg “ifeu-Institut” emphasized the social responsibility of science. They focused on “action research” and provided expert opinions for policy development. As “critical experts”, these scientists, Eggstein stressed, became driving forces of ecological modernization, and thus played a central role for developing environmental policies and transformative technologies.

BORIS HOLZER (Konstanz) examined the “Anthropocene” in both public and scientific discourses. Building on results from two studies, conducted by Martin Böhle, Leslie Sklair, Fabienne Will and himself, he argued that the concept was an increasingly relevant self-description of societies. While the origins of the Anthropocene lay in geological discussions, the concept was not determined by scholars from this discipline; rather, the Anthropocene discourse had become largely driven by scholars from the Humanities and Social Sciences. Moreover, the deliberations within the geologist community and their epistemic practices were only loosely coupled with the Anthropocene discourse. The Anthropocene debate therefore served as an instructive case to examine the public role of science as well as the scientific role of the public. Holzer thus also stressed the crucial role of scientists for nature-society relations but also clearly highlighted the limitations of their influence on the public.

In the final section, two papers considered the repercussions of pollution in globally interconnected settings. KIRSTEN MAHLKE (Konstanz), with a contribution from Romance Studies, positioned her account of the mercury crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth century at the intersection of an environmental catastrophe with massive cultural transformations. Mercury became a key colonial raw material since the early sixteenth century, initially as a symptom treatment during the European syphilis epidemic brought about by the Columbian Exchange, then in the amalgamation process for silver extraction. Mahlke argued that the crisis in the colonial “phantom territories” on both sides of the Atlantic, prompted influential cultural interpretations: the beginnings of the European novel through the work of Rabelais, Cervantes, and Aleman, and the work of the Peruvian Guaman Poma de Ayala whose chronicle laments mercury mining in the Andes as the primordial evil of the colonial period. In these interconnected “terrains of intoxication”, Mahlke showed, nature and culture were closely intertwined.

SIMONE M. MÜLLER (Augsburg) vividly demonstrated this interconnectedness in another way by drawing attention to the flip side of mass consumer culture in the twentieth century: toxic waste. In her paper, based on her recently published book^[4], she traced the troubled course of the ship *Khian Sea*: setting out from Philadelphia in 1986, it began a two-year odyssey roaming the world’s oceans in search of a dumping ground for the two thousand tons of incinerator ash it was carrying. Using its voyage as a guide, Müller made visible a downside of environmental conscientiousness in industrial nations: as the *Khian Sea* was chased by environmentalists and the press, it seemed to encapsulate complex environmental issues in a good story with clear heroes and villains. As a result, harbor after harbor refused to accept the waste, and it ended up being illegally dumped in Haiti and the ocean. Waste, a vestige of consumer culture, was pushed outward in the name of the environment. Both papers, in this way, made strong cases for the political dimension of the nexus of environment and culture. Occasionally, as Müller put it, political toxicity is more important than material toxicity.

In the final discussion, the workshop participants emphasized the strengths of the Humanities and Social Sciences when considering matters of Political Ecology. The presented analyses of narratives, the role of knowledge and practices, of infrastructures and the technosphere, and of activism all illustrated the distinctly political character of nature-society interactions. They displayed a great attention to detail and a sense of the complexity and contradictions inherent in them. These were the strengths of the fields represented at the workshop, which were essential for a comprehensive understanding of the uneasy and dynamic relationship of human societies and the environment. It was obvious that there was much common ground. The challenge for future collaboration, the discussion concluded, would be to establish a research program which built on the shared interests while retaining the benefits of the multiplicity of approaches presented during the workshop.

Conference Overview:

Sven Reichardt (Konstanz) / Timo Müller (Konstanz) / Sebastian Koos (Konstanz): Introduction

Water

Corey Ross (Basel): Water, Empire and Political Ecology

Daniel Rothenburg (Konstanz): Neoliberal and Sustainable? Water Resource Conflicts during Times of Crisis in Australia's Murray-Darling Basin, 1968–2020

Environmental Justice

Sebastian Koos (Konstanz): Do Climate Protests Affect Public Support for Climate Policies?

Alexa Weik von Mossner (Klagenfurt): Growing Hope. Narratives of Food Justice

Knowledge

Daniel Eggstein (Konstanz): “A Social Movement in Science“: Ecological Research Centers in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s

Boris Holzer (Konstanz): The Anthropocene as a Geoscientific Fact and as a Public Problem. The Anthropocene Working Group and the Decision about a New Chrono-stratigraphic Unit

Pollution

Kirsten Mahlke (Konstanz): Colonial Intoxication. Mercury as a Matter of Literary and Environmental History in 15th to 17th century Europe and Peru

Simone M. Müller (Augsburg): The Toxic Ship. The Voyage of the Khian Sea and the Global Waste Economy

Roundtable

Timo Müller (Konstanz) / Sebastian Koos (Konstanz)

Notes:

- [1] Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology*. Second Edition, West Sussex 2012, p. 13.
- [2] Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire. Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World*, Cambridge 2017.
- [3] Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism. Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860*, Cambridge 1995.
- [4] Simone M. Müller, *The Toxic Ship. The Voyage of the Khian Sea and the Global Waste Trade*, Seattle 2023.

Citation

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