

Panel: The Mobilization of Nature in Modern Germany

Rachel
Carson
Center

09 October 2010, Oakland, California, U.S.A.

Sponsors: German Studies Association Conference, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Participants: Christof Mauch (RCC) – Chair, Marc Landry (RCC / Georgetown University), Thomas Lekan (University of South Carolina) – Commentator, Adam Rosenbaum (Emory University), Helmut Walser Smith (Vanderbilt University)

The papers in this well-attended panel at the German Studies Association Conference examined the multi-faceted ways in which Germans “mobilized” nature for aesthetic, therapeutic, and technological purposes in the long nineteenth century. An innovative contribution to the panel was organizer Adam Rosen’s proposal that the term “mobilization” better captures the manner in which Germans interacted with their natural environment in this period. Rosen purports that “mobilizations” provides an alternative to environmental historians’ more familiar ideas about “conquering” the natural world, exemplified in David Blackbourn’s renowned book *The Conquest of Nature* (2006), or “turning” to nature, as conservationists and hikers did in John Alexander Williams’s book *Turning to Nature in Germany* (2007). Aside from Rosen’s contribution, other presenters moved beyond well-known debates surrounding *Heimat* and the nationalization of German nature by investigating the transnational dimensions of environmental history in Rhine Romanticism, Alpine hydroelectric dams, and therapeutic spas – a conceptual move that reflects a broader emphasis on contemporary transnational perspectives in German Studies.

In the session’s first paper, “The Rhine and the Beginnings of German Tourism,” **Helmut Walser-Smith** argued that the “touristic” discovery of the Rhine was a “transnational” event and that foreigners, particularly British Romantics, were decisive in the discovery. “German” descriptions were written in a melancholic rather than nationalist-xenophobic key. Through a close reading of travel narratives by Schlegel, Arnim, Kleist, and Arndt, Walser-Smith convincingly demonstrated that, beyond Arndt, there was little anti-French sentiment in German Rhine Romantic literature; these writers were mostly concerned with evoking the sublime and a stylized sense of melancholy over the loss of the Holy Roman Empire. Though the paper contained few descriptions of travelers’ interactions with the natural environment, Walser-Smith’s interest in melancholia and cosmopolitan nature appreciation departed from the more familiar narrative of “mobilizing” borderland nature for nationalist sentiment, as Arndt did in his famous treatise, *Germany’s River, Not Germany’s Border*, and provided a transnational framework for thinking about the relationship between travel, tourism, and nature in

the critical years surrounding 1800.

The second paper, **Adam Rosen's** "The Reichenhall Cure: Water, Air, and Terrain as Tourist Commodities," investigated surprisingly unexplored dimensions of German tourism and environmental history, such as the spa *Kur*, which demonstrated how the "middle-classification" (Palmowski) of the spa transformed the surrounding natural environment into an amenity for spa patients, day-trippers, hikers, and sports-enthusiasts. Rather than "subjugating" nature, spa promoters and local tourism associations glorified and commodified it for the enjoyment of guests, a process Rosen sees as a means of "grounding" the modern urban nation in the soil, rather than an expression of irrational anti-modernism.

In the third and final paper, **Marc Landry** showed how the Bavarian government in the decade before World War One tried to harness the waters of the Walchensee for a massive hydroelectric power network that enabled Bavaria to compete with its coal-rich neighbors to the north in the race to industrialization. Landry shows convincingly that transnational environmental regions—in this case, the Central Alps—offers a more fruitful unit of environmental-historical analysis than the nation-state because of similar landscapes gradients, resource needs, and infrastructure developments.

My commentary suggested that the presenters consider more deeply the conceptual possibilities of "mobilizing" nature and address scholarly insights from environmental historians, historians of tourism and nation-building, and historians of German modernity as they develop their projects further. In particular, papers could benefit from an engagement with what American environmental historian Ted Steinberg calls nature's "agency"—the unintended ecological consequences of cultural, technological, or social interventions on the environment. European environmental historians have been much less apt to acknowledge nature's agency than their North American, a reflection, perhaps, of the popular view that Europe lacks the "wilderness" of the United States and Canada. Yet American environmental historians have spent the past twenty years historicizing nature by demonstrating that iconic wilderness areas like Yosemite and Yellowstone were, in fact, shaped by American Indians long before their demarcation as national parks, resulting in non-European "cultural landscapes" which call into question any easy boundary between nature and culture.

All of the papers in this session challenged any easy association of "nature" and "nation" by underscoring the fluid and transnational appropriation of nature in German-speaking Central Europe during the long nineteenth century. Furthermore, they all addressed the deep contradictions in modernity's mobilization of nature, thereby challenging any lingering association between back-to-the-land movements and reactionary anti-modernism. The audience questions and comments fell broadly within the three themes outlined above. One listener asked Walser-Smith whether local literary elites, particularly Joseph Goerres, might have had a more anti-French tone in their works, a reflection of his disappointment with the failed democratic promises of the French occupation. Other audience members wanted to hear more from Rosen about the particular medical and epidemiological discourses that supported the saline cures of the Reichenhall spa and the relationship of spa medicine and emerging university medicine around 1900. They also inquired about the transnational dimensions of the spa: did spa owners market nature to foreign guests as readily as German ones, and did they

respond in the same way to such enticements as hiking and exploring the outdoors? From Marc Landry, listeners wanted to hear more about the nature conservation networks that emerged to stop the Walchenseekraftwerk, at least in its initial years: did such groups speak about the Bavarian Heimat in their call to action, and how did they differ from similar nature conservation groups in other alpine countries? The latter questions reflected a critical theme animating the session: the contradictions in the Germans' mobilization of nature which reflected the paradoxes of their search for an alternative modernity in the decades before World War I.

-- Thomas Lekan