

Workshop: Sources for Corporate Environmental History



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Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center, Deutsches Museum

Convener: Paul Erker (RCC)

With the development of the internet portal “Environment and Society,” slated to launch in late 2011, the Rachel Carson Center will offer a digital platform for sources and materials for environmental research in the humanities and social sciences. The portal will encourage users to explore collections of digitized documents and images, as well as interactive exhibitions putting these materials into interpretive contexts. The portal will provide relevant sources accessible to both environmental researchers and the general public. In addition to other topics, corporate history will be taken into consideration. The goal of the workshop “Sources for Corporate Environmental History” was, therefore, to explore possibilities for cooperation with corporate archives and to identify potential source material.

After Helmuth Trischler greeted the participants, **Paul Erker** began the conference with deliberations on the intersection between environmental and corporate history. He identified questions surrounding the accumulation, acquisition, and treatment of environmental knowledge in companies, the history of the relationship between industry and the environmental movement, as well as a “material historical approach”—such as the history of precarious substances like chlorine or dioxin—as possible areas of study. Such topics have been largely unexplored, which is why Erker—in line with the purpose of the workshop—advocated for close cooperation between the RCC and corporate archives.

The first speaker, **Susan Becker** (BASF Archive, Ludwigshafen), provided an outline of the source materials available in chemical companies. The existing files provide an external representation of environmental topics based on press releases, environmental protection guidelines, or environmental reports. Due to the sensitivity of the documents and corporate retention periods, insider information, such as the reconstruction of decision-making processes, is hardly accessible. The other participants also recognized that these restrictions made the proposed cooperation a sensi-

tive subject.

The next speaker, **Thilo Jungkind** (University of Konstanz), presented his dissertation project that deals with crisis communications in chemical companies during disaster situations. For this study, Jungkind used, among sources, the archives of the Bayer corporation in Leverkusen and the Roche corporation in Basel, Switzerland. His analysis considered not only the corporate, but also the public account of and response to the disaster. He revealed strategies of coping that went beyond the topic of "destruction," drawing from the disaster in broader contexts to provide a meaning. Jungkind identified the chemical accident in the Italian city Seveso (1976) as a caesura for the entire market, noting that it was an event that led a broadly-defined concern for the "environment" to become widely established on management and communications levels in many corporations.

Sabine Dittler and **Florian Kiuntke** spoke about the materials available in the Siemens Archives in Munich. Dittler and Kiuntke proposed that "official documents" such as environmental reports, advertisement campaigns, or press releases would be potentially useful sources for the digital portal. Early technological developments in environmental protection can be found in corporate archives dating back to the early twentieth century. The area of "resource-saving technologies" especially promises interesting findings that have not yet been analyzed from an environmental historical perspective. What counts as environmental protection in industrial manufacture today, was not labeled as such earlier and is hardly mentioned in relevant studies.

As the communal body of all Bavarian chambers of commerce, the Bavarian Economic Archive (*Bayerisches Wirtschaftsarchiv*, BWA) in Munich houses documents on the development of Bavaria since the beginning of industrialization. Chief archivist **Eva Moser** presented an overview of the numerous environmental history documents available at the BWA. The archive's materials allow for the historical reconstruction of infrastructural measures in energy supply, environmental legislation, and the history of agriculture. The BWA also houses extensive materials on the construction of the atomic reprocessing plant in Wackersdorf and the massive civil protest it sparked.

In the workshop's final presentation, **Annika Biss** and **Fred Jacobs** (BMW Group Archive, Munich) discussed the genesis of ecological considerations in the automobile industry. The concept "sustainable economy" entails research areas such as recycling, traffic management, or production and innovation processes. Because of the standard retention period of thirty days for sensitive documents, internal documents are only available up to the early 1980s. Future archive research promises many new findings, especially within this time period during which environmental protection and sustainability became a significant part of corporate communications.

The final discussion focused once again on the initial question: Based on the approaches and perspectives presented during the conference, how can we realize cooperation between corporate archives and the Rachel Carson Center's digital portal "Environment and Society"? The conference made it clear that there are a lot of potentially relevant materials, many of which still need to be looked at more closely and with different research questions in mind. Such sources range from the dumping of dilute acid in the 1960s and 1970s to photographs of international infrastructure building operations in the 1920s and 1930s. Participants also suggested further discussion on the treatment of retention periods and authorizations to use materials in corporate archives. The group unanimously agreed that corporate environmental history should not only be portrayed as the history crisis or conflicts: industry's commitment to sustainable production and the safety of the environment also deserves consideration.

The "Environment and Society" portal will not offer a closed canon of materials, but rather a growing collection of diverse resources representing the multidimensional nature of humanities-based environmental research. This stated goal of the project was widely supported by the archivists present. Thus, the workshop achieved its goal: to discuss opportunities and problems inherent to environmental history, to explore possibilities for collaboration with corporate archives, and to establish our first contacts. The RCC will continue in its efforts in this direction. For 2012, a workshop is planned with corporate archivists from non-German, international companies.

—Felix Mauch