

Trans-Environmental Dynamics: Understanding and Debating Ontologies, Politics, and History in Latin America

Rachel
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Center

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Sponsors: Fritz Thyssen Foundation, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, LMU Munich & Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Conveners: Eveline Dürr (LMU Munich), Ernst Halbmayer (Universität Marburg), Ingrid Kummels (Freie Universität Berlin), Karoline Noack (Universität Bonn)

Presenters: Rosa Isela Aguilar (LMU Munich, Germany), Dr. Sabina Aguilera (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany), Jonas Bens (Universität Bonn, Germany), Kyle A. Bladow (University of Nevada, USA), Dr. Victor Cova (University of St Andrews, UK), Alexandra Falter (University of Aberdeen, UK), Katharina Farys (Freie Universität Berlin), Dr. Daniel Graña-Behrens, (Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany), Dr. Antje Gunsenheimer, (Universität Bonn), Dr. Wolfgang Kapfhammer (LMU Munich), Dr. Evan Killick (University of Sussex, UK), Prof. Dr. Vanessa Rosemary Lea (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil), Oliver Liebig (LMU Munich), Maria Luísa Lucas (Museu Nacional/UFRJ, Brazil), Univ. Prof. Doz. Dr. Elke Mader (Universität Wien, Austria), Alessandro Questa (University of Virginia, USA), Dr. Ursula Johanna Regehr, (Universität Bern, Switzerland), Dr. Juan J. Rivera Andia, (Universität Bonn), Prof. Dr. Denise Pahl Schaan (Universidade Federal do Pará, Brazil), Heike Schilling, (LMU Munich), Dr. phil. Volker von Bremen, (Misereor, Germany), Saskia Walther, (LMU Munich), Dr. Eva Shamiran Youkhana (Universität Bonn).

In recent years, relationships between the environment and humans, as well as other-than-humans, have become a central research topic in anthropology, the humanities, and beyond. Anthropological theory and methodology are contributing decisively to new approaches in (non)human-environmental relationships by continuously generating new empirical evidence that allows for nuanced debates in this field. Currently, the ontological turn is at center stage and has stirred much discussion and controversy, with critiques ranging from attributing culturalist, essentialist tendencies to this approach, to celebrating it as a new tool that opens

an untapped heuristic potential. Debates in Latin America offer a rich field for exploring alternative models for environmental configurations that challenge Western logics of resource exploitation and economic profit, and allow for the exploration of diverse cosmologies. Such ontological conflicts find expression in the classical field between the traditional knowledge of indigenous groups and state-supported modernization and development projects, but also reach far beyond this. They may involve the transculturalized rights of “mother earth” established in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador or declarations for the rights of “mother earth” submitted to the UN. It may also be relevant for understanding and conceptualizing conflicts among cultural heritage programs, neo-religious movements, indigenous rights, ecological preservation, touristification efforts and economic interests. In this vein, this conference aimed to explore the points and processes of intersection where different forms of knowledge and ontological axioms meet, fuse and confront each other. We considered the environment as well as ontologies relationally, as interactively and mutually created in specific contexts that are politically charged and mostly asymmetrical. In order to advance the debate on Amerindian and non-Amerindian cosmologies and environmental issues in Latin America, these current debates were linked with a *trans-environmental* perspective. The conference was structured around eight panels focusing on specific themes.

The conference opened with a keynote given by **EVAN KILLICK** examining understandings of forest conservation and climate change mitigation strategies in contemporary Amazonia. Applying a triangulated analysis of emic and etic approaches to the Amazonian environment, the presentation considered the opportunities and limitations of the latest technical solutions being offered, the ethical issues surrounding the fact that climate change is itself an outcome of broader processes of modernity, and finally the role of indigenous people within both these debates and suggested practical solutions. Further, the keynote reflected critically on the ontological turn and provided an excellent framework for the overall topic of the conference.

The first panel debated “Rights and Conflicts” with three presentations. **JONAS BENS** elaborated on multiple ontologies and indigenous movements in the context of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in particular regarding land titles and re-emerging notions of the “noble savage”. **ANTJE GUNSENHEIMER** discussed a conflict between Río Yaqui Pueblos and the Mexican Republic, while **WOLFGANG KAPFHAMMER** addressed indigenous ontologies and alternative modernities in the Lower Amazon in Brazil.

The second panel encompassed two papers on “Development and Progress”. **VOLKER VON BREMEN** focussed on negotiation processes regarding the management of territories and governmental policies as well as REDD+ programmes. **KATHARINA FARYS** placed emphasis on diverse environmental conceptions of a biosphere reserve in Mexico and the role of cultural heritage.

“Debating Landscapes” was the title of the third panel with a presentation by **JUAN RIVERA ANDÍA**, exploring the consequences and politics of extractivism in the Peruvian Highlands. **DENISE PAHL SCHAAN’S** presentation placed emphasis on relational ontologies and landscapes among African Descendant Communities in the Brazilian Amazon. **SASKIA WALTHER** elaborated on emerging trans-environmental landscapes in the context of ecotourism in Mexico.

The fourth panel on “Environment and Energy” was kicked off by **VANESSA ROSEMARY LEA** on multiple ontologies and environmental conflicts in Amazonia, followed by **VICTOR COVA** with a presentation on indigenous resistance and conflict in Ecuador. **OLIVER LIEBIG** then discussed trans-environmental dynamics against the backdrop of a conflict over a wind park-project in Mexico.

The fifth panel, “Debating Time and Space”, started with **SABINA AGUILERA’S** presentation on Ralámuli’s conception of belonging and of their struggle for land. **HEIKE SCHILLING** presented on dimensions of time and space in the Ecuadorian Achuar’s world perception through oral tradition, ritual actions and everyday practices. This panel was concluded by **MARIA LUÍSA LUCAS** who elaborated on the relationships between stars and longhouses to measure and transform Timespace among the Hixkaryana in Amazonia.

“Objects” were debated in the sixth panel, with a presentation by **URSULA REGEHR**, who used contemporary drawings of indigenous artists from the Paraguayan Chaco with black ball-pen to discuss animist environmental conceptions and practices. **DANIEL GRAÑA-BEHRENS** started out with a historical perspective to review pre-hispanic iconography in the light of ontological theories, with a critical review of Philippe Descola’s approach.

The seventh panel debated “Plants” through an ontological lens and started out with a presentation by **ALEXANDRA FALTER** on ethno-pharmacology and adult education in Bolivia. This was followed by **ELKE MADER** on conceptions of “being in the world” in Amazonia.

Finally, panel eight addressed the “Ritual Life” with three presentations. **ALESSANDRO QUESTA** elaborated on the dance of the Nawa People in the Highlands of Puebla, Mexico, **EVA SHAMIRAN YOUKHANA** talked about the meaning of dancing of “danzantes prehispanicos” and **ROSA ISELA AGUILAR MONTES DE OCA** presented on a beauty contest in the context of the day of the dead ritual in Mexico. **KYLE BLADOW**, who used film to reflect on ontological differences and the negotiation of environmental values across cultures, gave the last presentation in this panel.

In the concluding remarks, the convenors elaborated on the main points of the conference that took place over three days. The papers touched on diverse topics and conceived the ontological turn in different ways. While some papers approached the ontological turn more from a methodological point of view, others chose a more descriptive way to develop their argument. The conference served as an important platform to exchange ideas on ontologies as a cosmological framework and on diverse conceptions of being in the world of indigenous Latin America communities. It helped to bundle and advance the current theoretical debate addressing some of the limitations and possible pitfalls as well as the potential of the “ontological turn”.

-- Eveline Dürr

