

European Society for Environmental
History (ESEH) Summer School—
“Water-Culture-Politics: Perspectives in
Environmental History”

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: European Society for Environmental History, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Convener: Christof Mauch (RCC)

Participants: Stefania Barca (Coimbra), Ewald Blocher (Munich), Ildiko Cesernus-Molnár (Budapest), Salvatore Ciriaco (Padua), Joan Ramon Ostos Falder (Barcelona), Miriam Gassner (Göttingen), Nuno Grancho (Coimbra), Dolly Jørgensen (Umeå), Gisèle Marien (Istanbul), Giovanni Mari (Vercelli), Christof Mauch (RCC), Felix Mauch (Munich), Sabine Meine (Centro Tedesco di Studii Veneziani), Ignazio Musu (Venice), Michael Neundlinger (Vienna), Helena Nynäs (Oslo), Viktor Pál (Tampere), Maria Pavlova (Moscow), Harm Pieters (Amsterdam), Gudrun Pollack (Vienna), Christian Reiß (Berlin), Marguerite Ronin (Nantes/Québec), Alexandra Silva (Coimbra/São Paulo), András Vadas (Budapest), Petra van Dam (Amsterdam), Carry van Lieshout (London), Hannah Werner (Heidelberg), Donald Worster (RCC / Kansas)

The 2nd ESEH Summer School was organized in Venice, Italy with the participation of 20 students from 16 European countries, as well as participants from Canada and Brazil as overseas representatives. The largest group within the student body was from German universities, and nationalities were represented from all corners of Europe from Russia to Portugal, from the United Kingdom to Turkey. The international student body gave presentations encompassing a wide spectrum of topics, time periods, and geographical areas, with a special focus on the interaction between water and humankind. During this special week in Venice, both professors and participants of the summer school acknowledged the large number of promising papers and professional reviews presented. The 2nd ESEH Summer School showed clear signs that environmental history is now undoubtedly an important and growing discipline with cutting edge projects all over Europe.

Venice as the stage, topic, and constant point of inspiration for the event was an important and successful choice of venue. The “City of Canals” provided mesmerizing cityscapes and a full experience of how water can be a foundation of power, a line of defense, and a transportation infrastructure at the same time. That experience was successfully complemented by three special venues - the Centro Culturale Don Orione Artigianelli, the Centro Tedesco di Studii Veneziani, and the Venice

International University on the Island of San Servolo. Participants spent most of their working time at the Centro Tedesco di Studii Veneziani located in the 16th century Palazzo Barbarigo della Terazza. The Palazzo has exhilarating views of the Grand Canale and hosted numerous inspirational debates of the summer school. Participants even received an inspirational guided tour by Dr. Sabine Meine, Director of the Centro Tedesco di Studii Veneziani. The island of San Servolo and Venice International University (VIU) are only a few minutes' vaporetto ride from the Piazza San Marco. VIU was founded in 1995 as a joint venture between the two Venetian universities and a number of prestigious foreign institutions, such as the LMU Munich and Duke University. The VIU was an inspirational and exciting venue for participants where students had the chance to deal with the important topics of globalization, innovation, environmental sustainability, and cultural heritage, brought together by the presentation of host Professor Ignazio Musu.

All participants had the opportunity to learn more about the Venetian environment and water-related issues through three field trips. The first of these, to the Venice Arsenal, was led by Dr. Elena Svalduz. Situated in eastern Venice, the arsenal dates back to the 12th century and is now a military zone. Thanks to the authorization of the Italian Navy, the students were able to visit this institution, an important experience in order to understand the close relationship between the former Republic and the sea, as well as the constitution of its maritime empire. The second excursion was to Puntolaguna, an information center dedicated to the maintenance and conservation of the lagoon's artificial environment. Alongside other issues, the main focus was directed towards the MOSE (MOdulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico) project. Managed by the Italian Government, this project is designed to protect the lagoon from high tides and storms - the "acqua alta" which can cause damage to the city. This presentation at Puntolaguna was elaborated upon by the third excursion: a boat trip in the lagoon. This was an opportunity to see the MOSE works in progress at the Lido gate, where an artificial island is already visible. Including a stop on Torcello island to visit the 7th century Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta, the circuit through the islands of Burano, Sant'Erasmus, San Francesco del Deserto and all the small unoccupied islands of the salt marsh was of great help in understanding the diversity of land usage within the lagoon, the deterioration of the islands due to erosion, and the solutions being applied to address this problem.

In the announcement for the 2nd ESEH Summer School, doctoral students were invited to present their papers on the topic "Water, Culture, Politics: Perspectives in Environmental History." These different issues were dealt with throughout the week by the student body and professors of the summer school faculty. The working time was divided between a significant number of lectures and topical panels during which students' papers were presented, discussed, and criticized. In the remaining time, opportunities were offered for debates and group work.

Lectures were given by speakers from the Rachel Carson Center and by external scholars. There was a great diversity of nationalities among the professors: American, Dutch, Italian and German. Donald Worster, Hall Distinguished Professor at the University of Kansas and Carson Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center, opened the work session with a keynote speech entitled “Water in History: Water Control in Empire Building.” Using the examples of the Chinese and American Empires, Professor Worster introduced many topics related to the link between the history of water and politics. Professor Petra van Dam, from the Amsterdam Vrije Universiteit, gave a lecture about “Amphibious Cultures Coping with Floods,” which provided an opportunity to discuss the difficulties and interesting aspects of comparative history in the cases of the Tonkin and Rhine deltas. Professor Stefania Barca (University of Coimbra), drew general attention to a 19th century Mediterranean subject: “Rivers and Vulnerability: Theories of Environmental Disorder in the Mediterranean Basin.” Professor Dolly Jørgensen, from Umeå University (Sweden), focused on a particular water pollution issue in medieval England: “What Goes in Must Come Out : Water Pollution and Urban Metabolism in the Pre-Modern City.” The immediate subject of the Venetian environment was not forgotten, as it was addressed by two lectures. The first of these, given by Professor Salvatore Ciriaco (University of Padua, Italy), set out the different phases and challenges of the conservation of “The Venetian Lagoon” in modern times. The second, given by Professor Ignazio Musu from the Ca’Foscari University of Venice, dealt with a more contemporary subject: “Economic Challenges for Urban Sustainable Development: The Venice Lagoon.”

These lectures were all followed by time set aside for debate and discussion, which, alongside the group work opportunities, provided students with a chance to discuss the various concerns related to their thesis subjects. The lectures and discussions were also held in connection with the students' papers, grouped into several different panels.

As could be expected from the large number of applications received for the ESEH Summer School and the range of disciplines and nationalities represented among the participants, the papers presented by students covered a wide spectrum of topics. The first panel dealt with the issue “Damming Water—Managing Water.” With this idea as a guideline, the presentation by Ewald Blocher (Munich) examined the link between modernization and economic development in Egypt. Using the example of the Aswan High Dam, water engineering was interpreted as a modernizing strategy intended to transform not only the Nile region, but indeed the entire country. With the advent of Egyptian independence, and perhaps even before, the river and the dam became symbols for the nation and its progress as a country. The connection between nature, culture, and politics was also identified in the presentation by Alexandra Silva (Coimbra/São Paulo). Her examination of the Belo Monte Dam in Brazil highlighted the high risk factor of large-scale hydroelectricity projects.

This case study illustrated the way in which the construction of the dam led to economic and social inequalities, and that the population in the immediate region surrounding the site in particular paid a heavy price for the energy generation. The contribution from Hannah Werner (Heidelberg) stimulated the discussion in a similar manner. She examined the connection between modern processes and questions surrounding “Western” concepts of development and expert knowledge in 20th century colonial India. She was able to show that the history of large-scale Indian dam construction must begin with the “irrigation visions” of the British colonists, whose experts implemented not only new technology, but also an entire economic paradigm in the Subcontinent. In the course of their almost ideological insistence on the feasibility of progress, they not only ignored traditional forms of knowledge and discourse, but also initiated and cemented a fundamental political and administrative transformation. Marguerite Ronin (Nantes/Québec) introduced an ancient history perspective on water management to the conference. Her presentation on water construction projects in the Roman province of what is now Spain and North Africa depicted a relationship based on shortage and waste. Roman settlements had developed into significant centers of resource consumption in their region. This laid the foundations for an urban way of life in which natural resources were exploited in the pursuit of excessive comfort and consumption.

The second panel was entitled “Conceptualizing Water.” Gisèle Marien (Istanbul) began by investigating the water concepts of Evliya Çelebi. Water in all its forms had always been of immense importance for the Ottoman scholar, with Istanbul and its aquatic environment occupying a particularly central position in his writings—for example in the opening section of his travel book *Seyahat-nâme*. A meticulous observer, he produced one of the first in-depth descriptions of Istanbul's natural environment, which, according to Marien, sensitized his contemporaries for water-related issues and is now worthy of considerable attention as a rich source for Turkish environmental history in the early modern period. Helena Nynäs (Oslo) took the example of the cataract Skjeggdalsfoss in Hardanger to illustrate the historical transformation of the aesthetic perception of nature in 20th century Norway. The paper which she presented showed how the waterfall was initially viewed as a “natural wilderness” and heralded as a place of national identity. Later, according to Nynäs, in fully harnessed form and within a wider field of hydroelectric infrastructure, it came to be seen as a monument of advanced technology symbolizing the future of Norway. Debates about the aesthetic quality of Skjeggdalsfoss served as indicators of the complexity of interests concerning the (economic) use of nature between the opposing poles of tradition and modernity. In the analysis of the aquarium as an artificial environment, Christian Reiß (Berlin) examined the common ground in terms of theory and practical research between environmental and scientific history. With his interdisciplinary approach, he identified the aquarium as a transit point designed to introduce elements of nature by turning them into objects of science. Using the example of the Mexican axolotl

(*Ambystoma mexicanum*), an amphibian species bred for research purposes in laboratories around the world, Reiß was able to present a history of environment(s), the analysis of which was not only directed towards the spaces in which scholars work, but also focused on the spaces and environments which scholarship itself creates.

In the section “Water in the City,” Joan Ramon Ostos Falder (Barcelona) examined water flows in Barcelona during the modern period. By exactly quantifying the development of urban metabolisms over a period of almost 300 years, Falder reconstructed the metropolis as a coherent urban ecosystem. Through the examination of such factors as population growth, income levels, and intensity of water usage, Barcelona's historical development – along with the ecological footprints of this development in the city – could be traced in considerable detail. The paper by Nuno Grancho (Coimbra) considered the Indian metropolis Mumbai as a historical palimpsest. His principal focus was on the British land surveys which decisively shaped the architectural and ecological face of the Indian megacity during and beyond the colonial period. Even today, he contended, it is the city planning interventions of the British which connect the environmental history of Mumbai to its current built-up form and urban logic through their spatial and infrastructural forming of the city area. Carry van Lieshout (London) continued with an investigation of the London water market in the 18th century. She was able to trace the path of the economization and commodification of water through to its development into a luxury product, and thus made an interesting environmental history contribution to the study of English economic history. The presentation by Giovanni Mari (Vercelli) involved an explanation of mechanisms of urban development and their ecological ambivalences. The example of Cologne Morteze, a small town in the catchment area of Milan, revealed the political and economic pressures which forced local decision-makers to introduce changes to the infrastructure in order to comply with the demands of the modern industrial world, which indeed did not reach some rural parts of Italy until the 20th century.

Rivers formed the central focus of the next part of the conference. Michael Neundlinger (Vienna) began by presenting the Danube and the city of Vienna as socio-natural sites. Through this theoretical conceptualization, both the materiality of social practices and the cultural agency of natural environment became evident, with Neundlinger pleading for a research perspective free from all dichotomies between nature and society. He insisted that it was in fact the common ground that should be emphasized, with the focus being on “hybrid” histories of the human-environment relationship. With a similar basis on such theoretical concepts, Gudrun Pollack (Vienna) analyzed human activities and material occurrences with respect to the Vienna River as a socio-ecological hybrid. Reconstructing the historical development of the river, which she interpreted as the result of interaction between several different practices (fishery, shipping, lawmaking) and structural arrangements

(bridges, dams, mills), Pollack was able to reveal various perceptions and mental images of the river. The history of the Neman River in the inter-war years was the starting point for the presentation by Maria Pavlova (Moscow), in which she illustrated its role in the international relations between its neighbor states Poland and Lithuania. The politicization of the river, which proved to be increasingly conflict-ridden concerning such issues as usage rights, reached its climax in the instrumentalization of the waterway for the assertion of national interests and led to a further increase in tension in Eastern Europe.

The panel “Floods” took place at the campus of the Venice International University on the island of San Servolo. Ildiko Cesernus-Molnár (Budapest) introduced the Banat region, a lowland area between Romania, Serbia and Hungary, and the way in which the local population deal with the risks of flooding. Her analysis concentrated on the human disaster protection activities initiated during the 18th century and came to the conclusion that the complex history of dealings with and management of floods and their destruction potential can only be accurately retold through an equally weighted consideration of political interests, social needs and natural occurrences. The contribution provided by András Vadas (Budapest) also addressed the connection between floods and water management. With an overview of the sources and possibilities for a climate history reconstruction of the natural conditions on the one hand and the anthropogenic measures on the other hand, Vadas was able to present the conference participants with a clear picture of the cultural challenges arising from flooding in the Kingdom of Hungary in the 16th and early 17th centuries. He revealed that it was largely the significantly high rainfall in the winter months as opposed to the general temperature conditions which often led to destructive flooding in the region. Felix Mauch (Munich) and Harm Pieters (Amsterdam) placed the cultural memory of flood disasters at the center of their presentations. Mauch introduced his conceptual considerations on the topic of how societies remember natural disasters and the role of memory culture for the prevention of catastrophes. Using the memories of flooding in Hamburg, he reconstructed socially desired and publicly staged commemoration, as well as tracing its influence on political and infrastructural decisions at the local level. Pieters' analysis compared the memories of the flood of 1825 in various regions of the Netherlands. He identified common elements and differences in the respective regional memory cultures and used the example of so-called “commemoration books” to illustrate how close together remembrance and repression are in the social handling of flooding disasters. These books served the administrative aspect of demonstrating the best practices in dealing with floods and were a means of public education. Narratives which could not be integrated into the texts in pursuit of these goals were removed from the reports.

The last panel of the summer school was dedicated to the topic of “Pollution.” Miriam Gassner

(Göttingen) presented a case study of the Italian oil company Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI) and its construction of a pipeline between Genoa and Ingolstadt. The work on the “Central European Line” in Austria, Switzerland and Germany was accompanied by numerous protests which attempted to draw attention to the risk of water pollution, particularly that of the drinking water supply. Gassner claimed that this, as a daily commodity, was able to attract far greater public attention than the often abstract demands of environmental protection. Viktor Pál (Tampere) analyzed the various methods and tools used to tackle water pollution in the Borsod Basin (in the central valley of the river Sajó, Hungary) in the 1960s. Pál argued that the environmental history of socialist states should not only be retold through a declensionist narrative, but should also take note of the fact that mechanisms of natural conservation and the limitation of pollution also played a role in political decisions. Without negating the existence of pollution-related problems, he suggested that future research take a multi-faceted, more complex perspective on the relationship between society and the environment in state socialism.

The 2nd ESEH Summer School in Venice was a success in all regards. Professors and students worked well together and it was apparent that these interactions were very fruitful in many cases and beneficial for students at various stages of their work. Many students still in the initial stages of their research were able to formulate more accurate research questions, while those students at the end of their PhD projects were able to fine-tune their conclusions and integrate constructive criticism into their future projects. It was pleasing to see collegiality and cooperation among both students and professors. The summer school provided an opportunity for students to learn from professors - not only in terms of their scholarly knowledge, but also in terms of being a role model in academia. This superbly organized event provided the feeling of hard-working days and relaxed evenings with fruitful conversations, debates and discussions throughout the week. All of us, both professors and students, consider ourselves lucky to have been a part of this wonderful academic event.

--— Marguerite Ronin, Felix Mauch, Viktor Pál,