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Asbestos: an environmental risk from a global-historical perspective.

The mineral fiber asbestos first made international environmental news at the end of the 1960s. Asbestos, and in particular its processed product asbestos cement became terms that were highly politically charged terms. Up until then, asbestos had been regarded as a wonder fiber, a magic mineral, due especially to its resistance to heat and fire. But later asbestos was branded as a carcinogenic “killer dust” and blamed for the death of thousands of people, and for epidemic exposure-related health problems occurring well into the 21st century. A raw material which had originally been associated with safety and protection was rapidly re-coded as a synonym for risk, danger and death. Moreover, asbestos had become a strategic product in the course of the 1960s: thousands of tons of spray asbestos were used to fire-proof and insulate American naval vessels.

My research project will examine the global development of asbestos in the light of a series of questions. To what extent does the story of asbestos function as a catalyst in the transformation of environmental knowledge forms and bases, for example with regard to the genesis of environmental health, or the “seepage” of awareness about environmental risks in society? What triggered the “asbestos crisis” and what were the environmental-political developments in the various affected countries? How, for example, did businesses - as part of society - react to dwindling resources, pesticide risks, asbestos and other hazardous substances? Which ecological learning processes did they engage in? How and why did different countries develop a different perception of asbestos as an environmental problem?

My study will also investigate the patterns and phases by which the problematization of asbestos was spread (from the USA via Sweden, Canada, Germany, England, Switzerland, France etc.). The asbestos crisis can be documented and tracked as a kind of “itinerary”. These patterns of dissemination are to a large extent aligned to the global phases of industrialization. Asbestos serves as a genuine substance of industrialization in developing and emerging nations; as a consequence, the awareness of asbestos as a problem spread to these countries with a corresponding time delay. While industrialized countries have been gradually mitigating the long-term risk of asbestos use during the industrial period of the 1960s, developing and emerging countries are in a golden era of asbestos production and use, which continues up to the present day.