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"Playing with Scales in Environmental History" International Workshop Held at the University of Tübingen on April 11th / 12th, 2018

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The international workshop "Playing with Scales in Environmental History", held at the University of Tübingen on April 11th and 12th, 2018, was devoted to one of the great challenges in contemporary historiography, namely the apt scaling of research objects. To initiate a debate, the organizers took their cue from an article by Prof. Emily Wakild of the Department of History at Boise State University, USA who framed the issue with the following set of questions: *What are the links between the local empirical realities of the research projects with global frames of relevance and the big narratives of the Environmental History of the 20th century? And does the recognition of environmental factors crucially challenge the traditional scales that are commonly used in historiography, especially the nation-state?*[1]

Prof. Dr. Klaus Gestwa, Director of the Institute of Eastern European History and Regional Studies, chaired the first panel. Prof. Dr. Ewald Frie (Institute of Modern History) and Daniel Rothenburg (CRC 923) started the workshop with an introductory note connecting general assumptions within environmental history to the research design of the Collaborative Research Center 923: Threatened Orders — Societies under Stress at the University of Tübingen. Thus, Prof. Frie underlined that different threats can play different roles entailing different discourses with regards to the region under scrutiny. Soil salinity, for example, is still a pressing problem in Central Asia while its effects can be neglected in many other parts of the world. This affects the way threats are perceived at higher levels, for example at a global scale. Daniel Rothenburg, therefore, emphasized that scales should be seen as empirical objects rather than ontological entities, i. e. scales should be adapted to the research question and not exist as premeditated parameters that are set in stone, true to the notion *«the fact that scaling involves vantage points and the positioning of actors with respect to such vantage points means that there are no ideologically neutral scales»*.[2] Dealing with environmental problems, this is especially important in the concept of borders, as ecological issues do not adhere to political boundaries. However, state borders can still play an important role in environmental history as threats may be stabilized by institutions or reigning ideologies. Therefore, the question should be asked about who is more efficient in dealing with environmental crises — the state and its institutions or local communities. In researching the history of rivers, which are both borders and unique ecosystems, this becomes especially obvious.

[1] *Wakild E.* The Challenge of Scale in Environmental History: A Small Meditation on a Large Matter // Crossing Mountains: The Challenges of Doing Environmental History. № 4. 2014. P. 19–29.

[2] *Summerson E.C., Lempert M.* Introduction. Pragmatics of Scale // Scale. Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life. Oakland, 2016. P. 1–21. Cf. the official workshop report by Adrian Paulik in H-Soz-Kult, 11.06.2018, <www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7737>.

Fig. 1. Speaker Frederik Schulze (left) and chairperson Klaus Gestwa (right).
Photo by Alexey Sobisevich, April 11, 2018
Рис. 1. Докладчик Фредерик Шульце (слева) и председатель Клаус Гества (справа).
Фото Алексея Собисевича, 11 апреля 2018 г.

In his paper "Hydroelectric Centers in the Periphery. Local, National and Global Perspectives on the Guayana and the Amazon", Frederik Schulze (University of Münster) presented two case studies on Latin American dam building in the second half of the 20th century: the Guri Dam in Venezuela and the Tucuruí Dam in Brazil. Local authorities, often formed in undemocratic ways by military ranks (*juntas*), ordered the construction of hydroelectric dams, inviting companies from the USA, Germany, and Japan. These dams became part of a local infrastructure, yet at the same time they were prestigious national projects that played an essential role in the *"global production of knowledge"* on the positive and negative aspects of dam construction.

In his presentation "Local Matters, Global Trends. Environmentalism in Rural Communities of Victoria, Australia", Daniel Rothenburg talked about the local initiative of 'Salinity Action Groups' that formed in the 1970s in the Murray-Darling Basin to find solutions for the increasing salinity of soils and water bodies as a result of misled irrigation practices. Rothenburg contrasted these groups with the "Ecological Revolution" of the time which was an eco-conscious answer to the increased industrialization and the so-called Green Revolution of the 1950s.[3] The Australian activists were highly conscious of the global environmental discourses and often times perceived themselves as part of this movement. However, two conflicting

[3] *Radkau J.* The Age of Ecology. A Global History. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. 546 p.

tendencies could be discerned: *conservation* (as the management of human resource use to ensure sustainable development for future generations) and *development* (the modification of the biosphere to satisfy human needs).

Alexey Sobisevich devoted his paper "Scaling the Black Earth. Nature Preservation in the Soviet Union" to the central role of biosphere reserves in Soviet environmental history. Along with his supervisor Prof. Dr. Valerian Snytko, he had done extensive work on the contribution of the influential geographer and long-time Director of the Institute of Geography at the Soviet Academy of Sciences Innokentiy Gerasimov in this matter.[4] Soviet scientists established local conservation projects as 'ecological laboratories', such as the Central Black Earth Biosphere Reserve, founded on the territory of the grass steppe in 1978. The core zone of this reserve was strongly protected from human activity so that scientists could carry out their research in a serene and untouched environment.[5] On a global scale, it served both as an object for international ecological cooperation, and as a vehicle for Soviet ecological propaganda and greenwashing.

Fig. 2. Speaker Benjamin Brendel (left) and chairperson Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (right). Photo by Alexey Sobisevich, April 12, 2018

Рис. 2. Докладчик Беньямин Брендель (слева) и председатель Жанна Фо де ла Круа (справа). Фото Алексея Собисевича, 12 апреля 2018 г.

[4] *Sobisevich A.V., Snytko V.A.* Some aspects of nature protection in the scientific heritage of academician Innokentiy Gerasimov // Acta Geographica Silesiana. 2018. Vol. 29. № 1. P. 55–60.

[5] *Sobisevich A.V., Snytko V.A., Savenkova V.M.* The role of biosphere reserves in environmental protection at the Soviet Union // GeoConference SGEM. 2018. Vol. 18. № 5.1. P. 963–969.

The following day was chaired by Dr. Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology). In his presentation on "Traveling Imaginations: Visual Rhetorics of Arid Soil, Dam Building and Salinization", Benjamin Brendel (University of Giessen) showed how the construction of the first large dams in the USA and the USSR during the 1920s was framed by a forceful visual language that expressed itself in the images of such photographers as Margaret Bourke-White. In the USA, for example, pictures of exhausted, dry and dusty soils were disseminated through highly circulated publications like "Life Magazine" in order to promote dam construction for electricity, irrigation and water supply. Large-scale technology promised to provide a way out of poverty, desolation, drought and hunger. These visuals soon turned into a global language of a technologically oriented artistic avantgarde.

Timm Schönfelder highlighted the great influence of environmental factors in Soviet policy-making with his paper titled "Ubiquitous Scaling in Soviet Ruralities. On the Role of Nature in Technopolitics". In the example of the Kuban River region, scientists, engineers, politicians and farm-workers formed a highly interconnected network during the second half of the 20th century that brought forth an "agromeliorative complex" with a strong focus on irrigation, water supply and drainage. This complex reached through all the levels of the Soviet state and was responsible for an often one-sided, generalizing approach to doing agriculture without the necessary attention to actual local requirements. This led to soil erosion in large parts of the North Caucasus.

Dr. Mustafa Coşkun (CRC 923) presented some preliminary results of his ethnographic fieldwork in his paper "Unboxing Scales: Rivers, Borders and Politics in the Fergana Valley". Owed to a long history of differences in the political economies and national identities between Kirgizstan and Uzbekistan, this region is an ideal site for the study of natural and organizational scales. For this, the different processes of re-ordering within irrigated agriculture after the fall of the Soviet Union are a striking example. According to Coşkun, problems such as excessive rice cultivation, which depleted the soils and provoked erosion, or illegal syphoning of water from irrigation canals, which can hardly be contained by governmental forces, are endemic in the area. Such practices create further tension on the national and international level in the competition for limited natural resources which has riddled the region time and again.

The final discussion was moderated by the organizers Ewald Frie and Daniel Rothenburg who underlined the strong influence of human actors on the natural environment within various scales, from the local to the global, with the nation state still as an important object of reference. Here, Mustafa Coşkun pointed out that one should not underestimate the role of natural forces which strongly influence human decision-making and agency. Alexey Sobisevich hinted at the different goals and discourses on the global and the national level of conservation. In this vein, Klaus Gestwa drew attention to the manifold forms of international cooperation in environmental questions. Timm Schönfelder suggested to consider issues of hierarchy when Soviet scientists collaborated with their Western counterparts during the height of the Cold War which, at times, created strong international networks of knowledge 'across the blocks'. Further studies on the history of the environment should, in conclusion, focus on the following questions: *"How do the actors themselves perceive scales? Which viable alternatives exist to the power of the state as a focal point in the historian's narrative? And how can we connect the various scopes of research in order to ask new and productive questions within environmental history?"*[6].

[6] *С англ.: «Как действующие лица воспринимают масштабы экологических проблем? Какие существуют альтернативы власти государства как главного действующего фактора в историческом процессе? И как можно объединить исследования из различных областей, чтобы задавать новые и продуктивные вопросы в рамках экологической истории?»*

“Играя с Масштабами в ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКОЙ истории”: Международный семинар в университете Тюбингена, 11–12 апреля 2018 г.

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С 11 по 12 апреля 2018 г. в университете г. Тюбингена (Германия) проходил международный семинар, посвященный роли экологических угроз различного уровня в экологической истории. В ходе двухдневного обсуждения ведущими семинара выступили как авторитетные ученые Тюбингенского университета — директор Института восточноевропейской истории и страноведения Клаус Гества и профессор Эвальд Фрае, так и молодые исследователи — доктор Жанна Фо де ла Круа и научный сотрудник Даниэль Ротенбург. На семинаре было уделено особое внимание вторичному засолению почв, вызванного ошибками в проведении оросительно-мелиоративных мероприятий на территории Краснодарского края и Ставрополья в России, Ферганской долины в Киргизии и Таджикистане, долине рек Дарлинг и Муррей на юго-востоке Австралии. Рассматривались также различные уровни экологических рисков в ходе строительства дамб на территории Соединенных Штатов Америки, Бразилии и Венесуэлы. Один из докладов был посвящен экологическим исследованиям, проводимым советскими учёными, в зоне чернозёмной степи.