

Nature and the Environment in East and Southeast Europe: Historical and Economic Perspectives

The first Annual Conference of the Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) Regensburg followed an interdisciplinary approach towards topics such as human appropriation of nature, actors and institutions of environmental policies, tension between transnational, national and local perspectives on environmental issues, and changing attitudes towards nature in East and Southeast Europe. Participants included economists, historians, sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and political scientists, their topics were ranging from the mid-18th century to the present. The two-day conference started with two keynote speeches from different disciplines, followed by six thematically focused panels with mostly interdisciplinary character.

The first keynote speech was delivered by KATE BROWN (University of Maryland), who compared the plutonium-producing “atomic cities” of Richland (USA) and Ozersk (now Russia), showing that similar problems with high labor turnover led to similar solutions albeit in different political systems. In both nations, a loyal workforce of specialists was created by providing a privileged lifestyle in what Brown labels as “Plutopia”, while dirty and dangerous work was largely performed by temporary workers who lived in separate quarters. The inhabitants of Plutopia reached such a high degree of conformity and identification with nuclear industry that health risks of living in a radioactively contaminated area could be largely downplayed in both places. With system competition over since 1990, transition towards socio-ecological sustainability is now on the agenda of former socialist countries as the second keynote speaker THOMAS SAUER (Jena) pointed out. As a member of the scientific advisory board of the NGO “Attac” he focused his speech on need for and conditions of self-organization of people that helps to shape and to change official institutions and institutional settings. Sauer underpinned the effectiveness of such collective action by different examples, including the recent online European citizen’s initiative Right2Water that now hampers respective privatization plans on EU level.

The first panel “(Inter-)National Regimes of Environmentalism” started with a presentation by SANDRA CHENEY (Erskine College), who emphasized that the GDR used its participation in international environmental organizations mainly as a forum to present itself as a legitimate state, while in fact an overriding strive towards economic growth, and an utilitarian attitude towards natural resources led to a weak implementation of its environmental obligations.

MARTIN MÜLLER (St.Gallen) traced the dynamics of number, size, and function of protected areas (Zapovednik) in Russia and concluded that their development was and is closely linked to changes in the political and economic thought. In present-day market-based Russia these areas are expected to become financially self-sufficient by developing tourism, which was stated to be largely unrealistic. The contribution of ÁRON BUZOGÁNY (Speyer) went beyond a state-centric view of environmental policy, which becomes increasingly internationalized. Buzogány listed key strategies of transnational networks of environmental NGOs that aim at providing local environmental issues a wider audience and at promoting them at the centers of supranational decision-making. However, the professionalism of some “elite” transnational NGOs can lead to contradictions and conflicts with domestic civil societies and grassroots movements. Contrasting this bottom-up approach, from an international and official perspective OLEG DZIOUBINSKI, representative of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Sustainable Energy Division, presented the strategy of the UN in promoting energy efficiency in transition countries. While numerous projects aim at harvesting the “low hanging fruit” of energy savings, Dzioubinski stated that country-specific institutional barriers often hamper their effectiveness so that country-specific instrument shaping would be required.

The second panel “Water and Politics” highlighted the connection between local hierarchies and power structures, and environmental problems. It consisted of case studies carried out by STEFAN DORONDEL (Bucharest) on two villages in the Romanian county of Argeş and by PETAR PETROV (Sofia) on a Bulgarian village that has been destroyed by a spring tide. In one of the villages of Dorondel’s field study, the political and economic transformation after socialism led to the withdrawal of the Romanian state and the careless dumping of agricultural waste at the banks of a local river; in the other case study, the springs of the local river were illegally appropriated by relatives of the village mayor who used them to produce mineral water. Although the local farmers were confronted with severe water shortages as a result, clientelistic structures have kept this mayor in power for almost 20 years. Petrov’s study pointed out that seemingly “natural” disasters are sometimes in fact man-made, and that processes that date back a long time contribute to them as well as modern everyday practices do. Petrov illustrated the efforts made by Bulgarian politicians to present themselves in a media campaign as “examples of effective disaster management”, while in reality flood victim’s competition for aid money created social tensions within the village, and reconfigured the social stratification decisively.

The third panel focused on popular attitudes and practices regarding environmental issues. The first contribution by RUMIANA STOILOVA (Sofia) listed successful environmental campaigns in Bulgaria and asked for the motivation behind them. Opinion polls that had been collected during fieldwork in the country revealed a high degree of interest in environmental topics. Stoilova and her co-author Franziska Bieri (Maryland) related these data to generalized measures of trust and other indicators derived from the World Values Survey Database and came to the conclusion that in Romania general trust is positively correlated to environmental activism, while trust in governmental institutions is not – which might be the explanatory fact behind the campaigns. MLADEN DOMAZET (Zagreb) compared attitudes of Croatian and Slovenian populations towards ecological and post-materialist values as they are revealed in various sociological data bases. While Domazet's findings in both countries seem to support the general assumption that in more prosperous societies (in this case, Slovenia) post-materialist values and a holistic attitude toward nature are generally more widespread than in less prosperous societies, he also pointed to possible alternative country-specific explanations, like the stronger preference of the Slovenian population for egalitarian principles. Moving farther east in the next presentation, MIRIAM FREY (Regensburg) for Ukraine described that environmental practices, namely electricity consumption patterns of households, are different in the western and in the eastern parts of the country. Having controlled for other potentially influential consumption factors like size of the flat or number of people living in the household, her results stay robust – western Ukrainians consume remarkably less electricity than their eastern counterparts. Again, there is not one single explanation, but a minimum of three potential transmission channels including the historical fact that the western Ukraine once belonged to the Habsburg Monarchy.

The contribution by HRVOJE PETRIĆ (Zagreb) complemented the panel by providing it with a historical perspective, presenting four parallel case studies from 1980s socialist Yugoslavia. In all cases, public protests led to the suspension of planned hydroelectric power plants. The study in three cases found a strong influence of individual environmental experts in social mobilization against crude modernization programs, while in one case the protest received support by environmental activists from Hungary and Austria.

The fourth panel focused on the geographic region of the lower Danube, starting with two papers by the historians LUMINIȚA GATEJEL (Regensburg) and STELU SERBAN (Bucharest) about attempts to tame the river from the mid-19th century to the 20th century.

Gatejel demonstrated that early attempts to improve the navigability of the river to facilitate the grain trade from the Danubian Principalities to Western Europe were facing natural as well as political barriers. After repeated failures by several states to improve the situation on their own, only the joint efforts following the internationalization of the Danube after the Crimean War finally proved to be successful. Stelu Serban focused on the economic effects of damming since 1895 till nowadays and came up with the hypotheses that the huge task to solve this environmental problem reflects the core of the economic, political and social modernization of Romania throughout different periods of history, including socialist times. Anthropologist OANA IVAN (Kent) complemented these historical perspectives with a field study in the fishing village of Sfantu Gheorge in the Danube Delta. As a result of intensive participant observation she concludes that from a local perspective, bureaucratic environmental programs imposed as a blueprint by governmental actors (in this case, the EU) sometimes not only limit bread-winning opportunities of the local population, but also disrupt traditional lifestyles and damage the delicate ecological balance between the rural communities and their natural resources. The establishment of a biosphere reserve and unrealistic bureaucratic regulations led to the neglect of traditional methods of preserving fish populations, resulting in their decline. Stronger competition for scarce fish resources in turn led to an erosion of the informal fishing culture, with poaching and corruption becoming more widespread. Notwithstanding her findings, centralist approaches toward nature conservation stay part of official EU politics.

The presentations in the two following panels on the “Management of Water” and on “Perceptions and Usages of the Upland” took up topics from the previous panels. In his presentation on water management in socialist Czechoslovakia, ARNOST ŠTANZEL (Munich) came to similar observations about the “fetish of economic growth” in socialism and its “rational” attitudes towards nature as Sandra Cheney in the first panel, viewing them as characteristic features of high modernism in the sense of James C. Scott’s theory. The historical studies by ROBERT GRAY (Keele) and ULF BRUNNBAUER (Regensburg) both described the downfall of traditional pre-modern economies as a consequence of modernization. Gray presented on the Sarköz wetlands in southern Hungary, where notches (foks) were traditionally used for controlled flooding of fields as part of the water management system. In the mid-18th century, the Habsburg administration viewed the wetlands as a source of disease and as an obstacle to modernization. Favoring dryland farming, it attempted to destroy the foks and brought in German settlers, leading to resistance

by the local population and nobility, finally bringing down the wetlands. Brunnbauer described the decline after the Balkan Wars of the upland economy of the Rhodopi Mountains that had been based on transhumant animal husbandry. He attributed the decline to the establishment of national borders and customs stations that cut the region off from its traditional summer pastures and from the primary market for its products in Istanbul. The talk of JAMES KORÁNYI (Durham) focused on the perception of the Carpathian Mountains in British travel literature before 1914. According to him the travel journals, while not free of patronizing attitudes, presented the region as a “rural utopia” and a place of wild beauty that was lost to contemporary modern England, and the contrast between pre-modernism and modernism was more important than the contrast between East and West.

The last panel on East-West entanglements started with MELANIE ARNDT (Regensburg), who presented reactions to and consequences of the Chernobyl Disaster in Ukraine and the U.S., such as the strengthening of environmentalist groups in the U.S., the hosting of Soviet children in western countries and the adaptation of the affected Ukrainian population to the catastrophe in their everyday lives. The author concluded that while governmental nuclear policies in both countries did not see lasting change, the popular perception of nuclear power in both societies did. The sociologist BOLDIZSÁR MEGYESI (Budapest) analyzed the results of semi-structured interviews he had carried out with farmers in the Hungarian region of Hajduság. Somewhat puzzling, his findings show that the global phenomenon of climate change is not perceived as a topic of immediate interest even by those who as farmers are directly affected by it. Finally, JULIA OBERTREIS (Erlangen), in her talk on environmental discourses and movements in socialist Eastern Europe, emphasized the important role of scientific experts that were familiar with western discourses for shaping them.

In her concluding remarks, MANUELA TROSCHKE (Regensburg) reflected on the major topics of the conference: the different roles of international actors, national policies and the local level; the influence of economic and social transformations on perceptions of nature; and actors as well as possibilities of local resistance to environmentally sensitive modernization projects. The final discussion reflected on the different methodological approaches of the disciplines represented at the conference and underlined that the interdisciplinary approach was not only useful for a deeper understanding of complex problems, but an important goal in itself. Thus, the new interdisciplinary annual conference series of the IOS was up to a good start.

Conference Overview

Keynotes:

Chair: Melanie Arndt, IOS Regensburg; Manuela Troschke, IOS Regensburg

Kate Brown, University of Maryland: Book presentation: *Plutopia. Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*

Thomas Sauer, Ernst-Abbe FH Jena: *The Role of Eastern Europe in the Sustainable Development Strategy of the EU*

Panel I: (Inter-)National Regimes of Environmentalism

Chair: Manuela Troschke, IOS Regensburg

Sandra Chaney, Erskine College: *Nature and East Germany's Search for Legitimacy during the Cold War*

Martin Müller, Universität St. Gallen: *From Sacred Cow to Cash Cow: The New Political Economy of Protected Areas in Russia*

Áron Buzogány, DHV Speyer: *Environmental Change in Transition Countries and the Role of External Actors: The Impact of the European Union on Environmental Policy - making in Romania*

Oleg Dzioubinski, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe: *Contribution of Energy Efficiency to Green Growth in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe*

Panel II: Water and Politics

Chair: Miriam Frey, IOS Regensburg

Stefan Dorondel, Francisc I. Rainer Institute of Anthropology, Bucharest: *Wasted Waters: State, Property Rights, and the Post-Socialist Appropriation of Nature in Romania*

Petar Petrov, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia: *What Actually Was the Disaster? Flood and Reconstruction in a Bulgarian Village in their Historical, Political and Socio-Cultural Context.*

Panel III: Popular Attitudes and Practices

Chair: Edvin Pezo, IOS Regensburg

Rumiana Stoilova, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia: *Environmentalism in Bulgaria: An Empirical Study on the Effects of Income, Post-Material Values, and Social Trust*

Mladen Domazet, Institute for Social Research, Zagreb: *Sustainability at Europe's Southeastern Periphery: Combining Historical Progress and Nature Protection*

Hrvoje Petrić, University of Zagreb: *Hydropower vs. Environment in Socialist Yugoslavia*

Miriam Frey, IOS Regensburg: *The Persistence of Environmental Awareness*

Panel IV: Using and Taming the Danube

Chair: Peter Mario Kreuter, IOS Regensburg

Luminița Gatejel, IOS Regensburg: Steaming up the River. Construction and Consolidation Works on the Lower Danube (1830–1856)

Stelu Serban, Romanian Academy of Sciences, Bucharest: Divergent approaches of Danube Damming in Romania. A Historical Perspective

Oana Ivan, University of Kent: 'My Father Would Die Again If He Saw How Ecologists Turned Our Ancestors' Fishing Ground Into a Pelican Reservation' Cultural Understandings of the Environment, Environmentalism, and Nature; Histories from a Romanian Fishing Village

Panel V: The Management of Water

Chair: Melanie Arndt, IOS Regensburg

Arnost Štanzel, Graduiertenschule Ost- und Südosteuropa, LMU Munich: Water management in Czechoslovakia Between Economy and Environment. On the 'Capitalistic' Use of Water in State-Socialism, 1948–1989

Robert Gray, Keele University: Between the Wood and the Water: Control and Use of Riparian Resources at the End of Hungarian Seigneurialism, c. 1750–1890

Panel VI: Perceptions and Usages of the Upland

Chair: Luminița Gatejel, IOS Regensburg

Ulf Brunnbauer, IOS Regensburg: Social Adaptation to Mountain Environments and Political Change: the Balkans in the 'Long' 19th Century

James Koranyi, Durham University: Across the Carpathians: Perceptions of Nature in British Travel Reports to the Carpathians, 1860–1914

Panel VII: East and West Entanglements

Chair: Ulf Brunnbauer, IOS Regensburg

Melanie Arndt, IOS Regensburg: From Iron Curtain to Radioactive Cloud. Fading Borders After the Chernobyl Disaster

Boldizsár Megyesi, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest: The Role of Household Farming in Reducing CO₂ Emissions

Julia Obertreis, Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg: The Limits of Growth – Environmental Discourses and Movements in Eastern Europe and Western Influence, 1970s to 1990s

Concluding Remarks: Manuela Troschke, IOS Regensburg

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