

Historicising Urban Nature

We live in a rapidly urbanising world. In Europe, over seventy per cent of the population of 656 million lives in urban areas, and this is expected to increase to eighty per cent by 2050, according to UN estimates. Urban populations affect both the local environment where buildings, roads, and parks are constructed and the hinterland where raw materials, energy, food and finished goods come from. The reach of a modern city is truly global. We cannot, therefore, afford to ignore the environment of urban life.

Although environmental history was initially founded on studies of rural places, the built environment quickly moved into the centre of analysis with classic works such as William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* (1992), Martin V. Melosi's 'The Place of the City in Environmental History' (1993), Christine Rosen and Joel Tarr's 'The Importance of an Urban Perspective in Environmental History' (1994), and Melosi's *Sanitary City* (1999). European contributions to urban environmental history came shortly thereafter, primarily in the form of edited volumes such as *Environmental Problems in European Cities in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (2001). These works show that the urban environment as home to humans is no less important in environmental history than wilderness areas or rural agricultural production. Rather than being peripheral to environmental history, the urban sits at its centre as a site of hybridity of human and non-human.

The workshop highlighted in this Notepad is a particularly welcome development in the study of European urban history because it breaks down common periodisation barriers. Since the obdurate human-built environment is overlain with faster changing political and social systems, decisions and infrastructures created decades and even centuries before have tangible effects on the functioning of a city. At this workshop, cases from 1500 and 1900 were compared side-by-side, with the result that similarity rather than difference appears to be the rule. Urban European populations have faced the same struggles with getting materials in and taking wastes out over the centuries and today. Technological systems and power relations have shaped and continue to shape the relationship humans have with the non-human. It is up to environmental historians to bring that long-term perspective to contemporary concerns about the urbanisation of nature.

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The Urbanisation of Nature. Environmental Narratives, Technologies and Power in the City (1500–2000)

On 20–22 March 2014, the Centre for Urban Research of the Technische Universität Darmstadt in Germany hosted the ESF Exploratory Workshop ‘Urbanization of Nature’, bringing together thirty specialists on the urban environment and its historical evolution over the past five centuries. Urban environmental history is by now a well-established research field, with many historians, geographers, sociologists and environmental scientists working on environmental challenges in cities and their evolution throughout history (see the ‘Round Tables of Urban Environmental History’ organised from 2000 to 2008 in different European cities, which were in a sense the direct predecessors of the present workshop). However, the conveners of this workshop, Dieter Schott and Michael Toyka-Seid from Darmstadt and Tim Soens and Bert de Munck from the Centre for Urban History in Antwerp, felt that, although many studies deal with environmental challenges in cities, few studies have actually questioned the agency of cities in dealing with nature. We wanted to challenge participants to think about several questions: Is there a ‘typical’ urban way of dealing with nature, as opposed to fundamentally non-urban ways? How did ‘urbanity’, ‘urbanisation’ or ‘urbanites’ alter our relationship with nature? At what point in history did ‘the urban’ become fundamental to understand the human–nature nexus?

With the number of city dwellers rapidly expanding beyond fifty per cent of the global population, the city is nowadays considered both as prime cause of environmental stress and as creative locus of conceptions of nature and policies to deal with environmental challenges. In the environmental history literature, this urbanisation of nature is usually associated with three conditions established in the long nineteenth century and expanding exponentially in the post-war period: the energetic transition to a fossil-based economy during and after the Industrial Revolution; the introduction of modern ‘networked’ systems permanently circulating water, food, energy, raw materials, products and waste within and beyond the city; and a cultural sensitivity towards nature as source of recreation. However, cities did not originate in the nineteenth century. Cities are built economically, culturally, politically and environmentally on centuries-long traditions. Urban historians working on the pre-modern period invariably argue that every feature of urbanity traditionally associated with ‘modernity’ finds its roots well before the industrial revolution. This workshop wanted to bridge the historiographical gap between the pre-modern and modern period, bringing together specialists on the ‘industrial’ and ‘post-industrial’ city with pre-modernists working on the urban–nature nexus before 1800.

Looking for essential transitions and continuities in environmental narratives, practices and technologies in European cities between 1500 and 2000,

the workshop questioned the idea of a ‘modern’ relationship between cities and nature. The long time span allowed us to examine evolutions of the ‘de-materialisation’ of natural resources in cities because of declining physical contact with energy, water, animals etc.; the construction of the knowledgeable (Descartian) subject who views him or herself as opposed to materiality and nature; the transformation of natural resources into marketable commodities; and the use of large ‘networked’ technological systems as preferred tools to cope with environmental challenges. We paid special attention to the evolving power relations embedded in environmental technologies, narratives and practices. Power in this workshop was not so much seen as instrumental top-down decision-making, but rather in a Foucauldian sense as ‘governance’, steering human behaviour through technologies, everyday practices and matters of conduct.

A first introductory session introduced different concepts to approach the urban environment, derived from Science and Technology Studies, Actor–Network Theory and Political Ecology. The bulk of the presentations were organised into sessions along the lines of the urban metabolism: food and fuel; waste and recycling; and water. In each session, pre-1800 cases invariably confronted examples from nineteenth and twentieth century cities. Two sessions on the negotiation of the urban environment and the environmental consequences of implementing European urban models in non-European contexts complemented the workshop. The programme details are available online at http://www.cityandsociety.be/files/EW13-138_Programme.pdf

After three days of intensive debates and discussions, a final round-table, opened by Chris Otter, Dieter Schott and Bert De Munck, tried to rephrase the problem of the ‘urbanisation of nature’ from a historical perspective. Participants suggested that we rethink the ‘urbanisation of nature’:

- As the process of externalising the urban metabolism, including risk, to an ever-further hinterland, eventually encompassing the whole world
- As the colonisation of nature by the (capitalist/modern) city, in the end leaving not a single piece of nature which is not defined by the city
- As changes in the construction and experience of *time* from the cyclical, seasonal time of nature, towards the abstract, linear time of modernity / capitalism
- As the gradual rise of a ‘technosphere’, an environment in which every human action as well as every interaction with the non-human world is embedded in a giant interconnected cyborg (technological–organic) infrastructure
- To reject traditional distinctions between the modern and the pre-, early and post-modern and instead look at transitions and continuities, at phases of expansion and retrenchment of urban spatial imprints

- To compare local experiences in different topographical, natural, economic and political contexts

Because this workshop framed cities as the object of analysis, some participants suggested that we might have overestimated the agency of cities, as we were only looking at cities. Perhaps causality in the changing relationship of man and nature should not be sought in the concept of the city itself, but rather in processes that occur in both city and countryside, such as capitalism, the articulation of private property rights and the rationalisation of the human world-view. Or perhaps, as Bruno Latour would suggest, causality itself is a myth, and cities and nature, the human and the material, are perpetually intertwined, co-emerging and co-evolving without research being able to distinguish between them.

In 2015, this workshop will result in a book on 'urban agency' with regard to nature, which will be part of a new four-volume book series on the role of cities in European history between 1500 and 2000. The organisers still welcome new input, especially on urban environments in Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, which were underrepresented in the case studies presented at this workshop. Finally, the organisers are most grateful to the European Science Foundation for funding this stimulating workshop, as well as to the TU Darmstadt for hosting it. Unfortunately, the funding scheme for ESF 'exploratory workshops' which brought together small groups of experts on innovative subjects across science has been cancelled by ESF for budgetary reasons. Hopefully an alternative will be made available in future.

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