



Panel report:

Umweltgeschichte als Beziehungsgeschichte. Historische Konzepte des Zusammenlebens in der Ökosphäre

Geneva, June 29, 2022, 6th Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences

Convener: Mirjam Hähnle / Milo Probst

Participants: Mirjam Hähnle / Milo Probst / Linus Ruegge

Comments by Annette Kehnel

Report by Eliane Schmid, FernUni Schweiz

“Anthropocene” and “Modernity” are two provocative buzzwords. **MILO PROBST** (Basel) used the two words in his introduction precisely because of their ambiguity and their omni-presence in this panel centering on environmental history as a history of relations. Three different historical perspectives on conceptions of coexistence in the ecosphere were presented.

MIRJAM HÄHNLE (London) began her talk by presenting Johannes Valentinus Andreae’s Christian utopia: *Christianopolis* (1619). It is, for its time, a unique example of an imaginary ecosphere where humans, animals, and plants live in friendly co-habitation. Carolyn Merchant too believes that *Christianopolis* is a text worth paying closer attention to. In her 1980 ecofeminist groundwork, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Merchant uses, amongst other connections to historical utopias, *Christianopolis* to support her thesis that there is a need for utopias to capture the interest and motivation of people, so they become actively engaged in social issues.

Christianopolis is perfectly square and symmetrical. The socio-ecological structure refers to God, and so does the architecture. In the city, sources are imagined as finite and there is no private property: everything is used collectively and is distributed by an official (*‘oekonomus’*). The citizens of *Christianopolis* work with what they find in nature and through this they get to know God and themselves. Animals find their space as well, albeit where humans find use for them. Therefore, the ecosphere, according to Andreae, is something that can be appropriated by humans. This seems problematic and was criticized by Merchant. She also frowns upon the fact that utopias are imagined perfections. Yet, she also believes we need new utopias, and these must entail the concepts of ecological problems and ecofeminism. Hähnle ended her talk with the cautioning words that utopias are to be eyed critically and need to be contextualized. Nonetheless, throughout the centuries there appears to be an unneglectable necessity for utopias, and this is what continues to stir us today.



Milo Probst's research is set at the turn of the 20th century and analyzes French anarchists' goals for "the return to nature". The starting point for this analysis was Élisée Reclus' *L'Homme et la Terre*, published in 1908. Reclus centered specifically on children's individuality and their relation to nature. Nature and body were essential in his texts and so were his ideas for emancipatory pedagogy. Reclus proposed that the child should go back to nature, to the countryside where its "spontaneous" development could be supported.

However, emancipatory pedagogy is not flawless. At its core there is the will to improve humans, giving it a closeness to eugenics and racist thinking. Still, Probst believes there is more to be unearthed when studying these anarchists and their nature-bound educational reform ideas, which is why he introduces three additional, contemporary French anarchists. The first is Jean Grave, who wrote *L'Individu et la Société* (1897). Grave postulates that metaphysical concepts can replace God, and uses the concept of 'nature' for this. Paul Robin, also a pedagogue, published *Notre Programme* in 1896 and takes a stance against the dualism of body and mind. Madeleine Vernet, teacher, writer, libertarian, and pacifist, wrote *L'Avenir social: cinq années d'expérience éducative* (1911) in which she proposes to completely collapse the differentiation of gender roles and calls for a proliferation of the natural and through this a liberation of the sexes.

Connecting these four texts, Probst deduced that the term "nature" in the modern period led to profound thinking about nature and culture, and the idea that emancipation is only possible if one leaves behind "nature". Probst here linked to the aforementioned ecofeminism. French female anarchists of the late 19th century spoke about discovering a liberating nature. The anarchist pedagogy breached upon in this talk, may seem teleological as nature is taken as an entity. Thus, Probst ended with the critical statement that seeking a "spontaneous growing up" which leads to "perfection" is very much contested and has little liberational aspects.

LINUS RUEGGE (Basel) presented the case study of the Rotsee (Lucerne). Similar to Probst, Ruegge asked what kind of nature was spoken of in the early 20th century – but this time in the city of Lucerne. The Rotsee, so Ruegge, is appreciated today for its beauty and its allegedly perfect shape for rowing. In the 1930s a similar stance can be perceived. Yet, this appreciation of the Rotsee was not always the case. Ruegge illustrated how the Rotsee was initially largely ignored, then misused as a dump in the early 1900s until it was "saved" in the 1920s.

The "saving" period of the Rotsee is what interested Ruegge in particular. To clear the lake of its toxins, a canal was built from the river Reuss, and the Rotsee became a protected natural environment. From today's perspective, one would assume that the lake was saved for environmental reasons – this was not the case in the 1920s and 1930s. Local politics and personal interests were the main drivers. The society *Pro Rotsee* was founded by 31 men, 20 of whom were property owners in the neighborhood, with the goal to take care of the "maltreated" lake. In 1948, after life had returned to the lake, fishing regulations were introduced. Other ambiguous regulations to "save" but effec-



tively to control the Rotsee area followed: lakeside paths were constructed and so where off-limit areas; wildlife was hunted while swans were introduced as decoration; swimming was prohibited, and rowing became the main point of attraction. This list illustrates how the society hardly followed any specific program or ideology.

Ruegge concluded that the lake was at least recognized as an area worth saving, even if it was a combination of chance, personal interests, and situational decisions. He left it to us to deliberate whether it is the result that counts, or the path that led to it.

ANNETTE KEHNEL (Mannheim) commented on the talks with three statements. Firstly, she stated that she had learnt so much. Utopias as taming-machines; emancipation as a proliferation of the natural; from state of nature to renaturalization – these are key phrases Kehnel noted. Secondly, Kehnel remarked that in all three talks nature seemed only to be accepted by humans in exactly those instances, where they could find use for it, effectively rendering humans a machinery of exploitation. Thirdly, Kehnel proposed to take up the term “relating” instead of “relativizing” – just as the title suggests. What contributions can historians make for the present? Did this panel teach us to make “relations”? and Can we as historians change something? are questions the talks prompted in her.

Kehnel finished with what she explicitly named a “provocation”: She wished historians could have their 19th century bravery back. Specifically, historians of the 19th century actively shaped nation building with their narratives and did not leave storytelling to politicians. It is time, so Kehnel, to give the 20th and 21st century new narratives of the ecosphere.

The “provocation” was received critically, and the audience pointed to the fact that there are indeed very politically active historians. In general, the panel triggered questions of contrasts: we were talking about the leftist perspective, what about the right?; orderliness is key, but what about disorder and tensions; we learned about strong narratives, what are the counternarratives?; we thought about relations, but between whom and who is excluded? The panel left the audience animated to start more discussions, to prove the statement wrong that historians are not actively engaged nowadays, and to think about various forms of relations in our ecosphere.

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Panel overview:

Mirjam Hähle: Organische Ganzheiten. Carolyn Merchant und die sozio-ökologischen Stadt-Utopien der Frühen Neuzeit

Milo Probst: Wachsen lassen: Natur und Körper in der anarchistischen Pädagogik Ende des 19./Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts

Linus Ruegge: Stadtgesellschaft im Grünen. Eine Sozialgeschichte urbaner Natur am Luzerner Rotsee

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