

History and Climate Change: What have we learnt?

A workshop at the Birmingham and Midland Institute

8th November 2014

Programme

Session 1 (10.30-11.20)

Roundtable discussion: Mark Levene (University of Southampton), Paul Dukes (University of Aberdeen), Frank Uekötter (University of Birmingham)

Session 2: History and climate change (11.30-1.00)

'Managing flood and river flow: early medieval place-names in contemporary context'

Richard Jones (University of Leicester)

'Livelihoods, history, politics, culture: Lessons for climate change from nineteenth-century India'

George Adamson (King's College, London)

'Come for the Past, Learn About the Future: Rethinking Interpretation at an American Historical Site in the Age of a Changed Climate.'

Philip Levy (University of South Florida)

Session 3: Climate change, the academy and society (2.00-3.45)

'From 'back to nature' to 'alternative hedonism': rethinking contemporary feminist and queer histories in an age of climate change.'

Carrie Hamilton, Roehampton University

'Freaks ON nature. A Climate Change Crip-story: on occupations and discriminations of disabled people in the history of environmentalism, ecology and related arts practices'

Alicia Grace, Independent researcher and arts practitioner

'Archivism, Activism and Climate Change in the 21st century: Lessons from Paganel Primary, B29'

Marcus Belben (University of Birmingham)

Abstracts

'Managing flood and river flow: early medieval place-names in contemporary context'

Richard Jones (University of Leicester)

Flooding is the most serious environmental threat the UK currently faces. This paper asks whether early medieval place-names have a role in tackling this issue. Most English place-names were coined between c. 700-1100, a period which experienced rapid warming and higher precipitation offering parallels for our own times. Many of these names encode information about the presence, characteristics and behaviour of water and its management. They include direct references to water flow, areas of fen/marsh/moor, and indirect inferences to damp ground and/or water-loving fauna and flora. Place-names also detail the extent and nature of water-capturing woodland. The vocabulary used is rich with over 300 'watery' terms and over 100 'woodland' names. With subsequent climate changes many of these names fell redundant. In the last couple of decades, however, there are signs that they have regained a contemporary significance—it is difficult to ignore how many recently flooded places contain a watery element in their name. Mapping these names against both archaeological and topographical backgrounds across whole river catchments, and against the geography of recent flood events, this paper examines which aspects of place-naming find relevance today, and how these historic names might inform current calls for the more flood protection, the reforestation of uplands and 'Slowing the Flow' initiatives.

'Livelihoods, history, politics, culture: Lessons for climate change from nineteenth-century India'

George Adamson (King's College, London)

The fear of a destructive climate has become one of the dominant global socio-political narratives of our times. Yet climatic hazards are not new; millions have died in historical drought-induced famines, cities have been lost to floods and entire civilisations have shifted based on changes in climatic patterns. Whilst the twentieth century saw the release of vast quantities of CO₂ into the atmosphere, it also brought about unparalleled prosperity and reductions in social vulnerability. With a system that varies on the timescale that the climate system does, a thin focus on the last few decades cannot be fruitful. This paper draws on research on the socioeconomic effects of climate stress in nineteenth century western India to address how history can inform climate change. First, it asks how the history of meteorological disaster management can guide contemporary problems. How can we take account of the huge sociocultural changes that have happened in the last 100 years and still find relevancy in historical extreme events? Secondly, it asks what lessons we can take from a deeper historical perspective around climate variability and change.

'Come for the Past, Learn About the Future: Rethinking Interpretation at an American Historical Site in the Age of a Changed Climate.'

Philip Levy (University of South Florida)

This paper looks at Ferry Farm, the preserved historical Virginia landscape where George Washington passed his childhood. The site is best known as the setting for the celebrated "Cherry Tree Fable" (itself a species of environmental parable). But it has also been the subject of extensive archaeological study and is now in the early stages of reconstruction and museum building. Inherently nationalistic discourses are woven into the logic and motivation for preservation at Ferry Farm as they are at many sites. But at the same time, projects like reconstructing realistic eighteenth-century architecture and landscapes provide unique opportunities for re-envision how contemporary people can live on the land. What I argue for is a sort of Anthropocene focused "bait and switch" whereby familiar and privileged historical concerns can open the door to discussing life on a planet with a changed climate. In fact, I believe that historical sites like Ferry Farm are ideal places to reinvent histories to help shape the future.

'From 'back to nature' to 'alternative hedonism': rethinking contemporary feminist and queer histories in an age of climate change'

Carrie Hamilton (Roehampton University)

In what ways does evidence of climate change demand that historians revise some of our basic historical concepts, and does it require that we tell new stories about radical politics in the contemporary period? My focus will be on feminist and queer histories, and specifically on how radical historians may contribute to writing a history of what Rob Nixon calls 'intersectional environmentalism'. I ask how Ramachandra Guha's proposal that the world since the late twentieth century consists of three socio-economic classes - omnivores, ecosystem people, and ecological refugees - prompts new approaches to the categories of recent human history. The paper will consider the case of ecofeminism, which proposes a special connection between 'women' and 'nature'. The evidence of climate change, I argue, prompts us to shift our attention away from preoccupations with preserving 'nature' or getting 'back to the land', to a critique of over-consumption (the behaviour of the 'omnivores' of Guha's formulation), particularly in the urban global north. An attention to historical examples of feminist and queer politics of anti-consumerism - or 'alternative hedonism' - may open one way to writing a radical history of 'intersectional environmentalism' that also offers models for change in the present.

'Freaks ON nature. A Climate Change Crip-story: on occupations and discriminations of disabled people in the history of environmentalism, ecology and related arts practices'

Alicia Grace (Independent researcher and arts practitioner)

In recent years the concept of 'disability history' has become recognised by the mainstream media and scholarship. Disability history contains many examples of the contributions politicised disabled people have made to environmental activism, from antinuclear sympathies, to their role in establishing the Occupy movement. However, despite this history, the marginal position disabled people face in an event of ecological crisis, and that ecological crisis itself can often be a cause of impairment and disability, there is little recognition charted on the relationship between environmentalism and disability. Could it be that themes of bio-centricism used by environmentalists have been exclusive and discriminatory towards disabled people? Do crisis rhetorics of scarcity and apocalypse, or 'repair' rhetorics of purity, wholeness, endurance and self-sufficiency, posit disability as problematic to the cause? Could the historic relationship between the Eugenics movement and Romanticism persist unconsciously in contemporary environmental discourse? How has the recent mainstream acceptance of Climate Change, in parallel to austerity measures, complicated disabled people's 'ecological' positioning? These questions will be explored by looking at the work of Deaf and Disabled artists who explore Disability in relationship to place, nature and environment.

'Archivism, Activism, and Climate Change: Lessons from Paganel Archives'

Marcus Belben (Paganel School & University of Birmingham)

Paganel Archives is the first, and only, ARCHON registered Archives in a UK state primary school. It is a unique resource managed by children, parents and staff documenting the school community, reflecting the community in which the school is set. Paganel archives are used as a learning resource within the school to support a range of projects and learning, both in documenting and contributing school experiences to the archives, and in using those experiences to learn from - using our real experiences to better reflect and engage learners. One of the greatest challenges for educators and activists, is not so much 'what we are learning' but 'how' - making learning relevant and provoking others into further research and action. Children in year 5 took part in a project 'Make do and mend', using archives and conducting interviews to explore a historical perspective, and presenting their thoughts on issues of recycling. I will present how we worked with children on 'Make do and mend' to place the children as investigators and form their own opinions on recycling and climate change. This presentation is less about 'what we have learnt' but 'how we can learn' from history about Climate Change.