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**Towards a new approach in urban history. The Round-Tables for Urban
Environmental History (1998-2008)**

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Towards a new approach in urban history. The Round-Tables for Urban Environmental History (1998-2008)

1. Introduction

This article retraces the emergence of a new approach in modern urban history, which was developed at the turn of the 21st century in order to connect and cross-fertilize urban and environmental history. Initiated by a group of historians from various European countries who came together for the first time in 1998 at the 5th conference of the European Association for Urban History (EAUH) in Venice, a series of conferences and a handful of books were launched. In particular, five international conferences held under the title “International Round-Tables for Urban Environmental History” over a decade until 2008 helped to create a network and further develop the approach. This article attempts to critically reflect on the basic idea, the impact and the historical place of the initiative in the context of recent research in urban history.

From the beginning, the core group of postdocs and young lecturers working at various European universities and research institutes shared the idea that research on modern urban history, as established from the 1970s at Leicester University (UK) and other institutions¹, urgently needed to take up fresh perspectives from the emerging discipline of environmental history. Contemporary environmental problems such as air, soil and water pollution, nuclear waste, the climate crisis and the rise of environmental movements strongly called for an inquiry of their historical roots. The intellectual key idea of the group was that some well-known historical phenomena in 19th and 20th century cities, like waterborne urban diseases, sanitation, hygiene, and a large number of neglected problems, such as biodiversity or animals in the city, had strong similarities to the contemporary issues of the 1990s. These historical precedents were to be analyzed in a comprehensive and systematic way with the help of fresh theoretical concepts, and be established as key issues of modern urban history.

¹ Cf. for a contemporary survey on the state of modern urban history research in Europe: Christian Engeli/Horst Matzerath (Eds.), *Moderne Stadtgeschichtsforschung in Europa, USA und Japan. Ein Handbuch*, Stuttgart 1989.

2. The Venice EAUH conference, 1998

When, in 1996, Christoph Bernhardt applied for a session on urban environmental history for the 1998 EAUH conference in Venice, a proposal that was accepted by the EAUH committee, this was in fact the first session on this theme in the history of the association. But the idea could build on a number of pioneering studies, like those by Peter Brimblecombe on the history of smog in London, Joachim Radkau or Franz-Josef Brüggemeier in Germany, and André Guillerme's long term study on water in French cities, to name only a few.² At the EAUH conference before Venice, held in Budapest in 1996, Dieter Schott had organized a session and an edited volume on "The city and energy", in which environmental issues were addressed by several authors.³ There was also a number of studies on urban green spaces, and the French school of "Annales" had discussed some environmental issues, such as climate change and its impact on history quite early.⁴ In the preparation of the Venice 1998 session, the advanced US-American debate proved to be a helpful inspiration. Some controversial debates in the US, like the one on the so-called "agro-ecological approach", which tended to see modern urban settlements as problematic per se, were not yet widely received in Europe.⁵ But scholars like Joel Tarr, Christine Meisner Rosen and Martin Melosi had already set some milestones in the study of environmental problems in urban history, like sewage and sanitation history⁶, to which the initiative could refer. From the beginning of the network,

² Peter Brimblecombe, *The big smoke. A history of air pollution in London since medieval times*, Cambridge 1987; Joachim Radkau, *Natur und Macht. Eine Weltgeschichte der Umwelt*, München 2000; Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, *Das unendliche Meer der Lüfte. Luftverschmutzung, Industrialisierung und Risikodebatten im 19. Jahrhundert*, Essen 1996; André Guillerme, *Les temps de l'eau. La cité, l'eau et les techniques. Nord de la France fin IIIe-début XIXe siècle*, Seyssel 1983.

³ Dieter Schott (Ed.), *Energie und Stadt in Europa. Von der vorindustriellen Holznot bis zur Ölkrise der 1970er Jahre*, Stuttgart 1997.

⁴ Cf. *Annales Economies-Sociétés-Civilisations* 29:3, 1974, „Histoire et Environnement“. On the origins of French environmental History, cf. Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, *Historiens et géographes français et relation de l'homme au milieu, de Vidal de la Blache aux programmes de recherche interdisciplinaires de la fin du XXe siècle*, in : Samuel Robert (Ed.), *Les Interactions hommes-milieus. Questions et pratiques de la recherche en environnement*, Versailles 2014, p. 77-96.

⁵ Cf. Christoph Bernhardt, *Umweltprobleme in der neueren europäischen Stadtgeschichte*, in : Christoph Bernhardt (Ed.), *Environmental Problems in European Cities in the 19th and 20th Century. Umweltprobleme in europäischen Städten des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Münster 2001, p. 5-23.

⁶ Cf. Christine Meisner Rosen/Joel A. Tarr, *The importance of an urban perspective in environmental history*, in: *Journal of Urban History* 20:3, 1994, p. 299-310; Joel A. Tarr, *The*

American colleagues took part at the conferences and wrote chapters for the books.⁷

The session in Venice went beyond the contemporary state of the art in urban history, as it consequently focused on the transformations of urban environments and their perception. Within this framework, the session systematically brought together studies on various theoretical problems and empirical issues. It attracted a remarkable number of distinguished as well as younger scholars and covered a variety of topics. Some of the topics were already well studied but were reevaluated from new perspectives, like urban water problems, industrial pollution or public health. But there were also new theoretical approaches and empirical studies on patterns of the perception of environmental nuisances, the pollution of the urban soil, and so on.⁸

In a discussion after the session, the participants shared the notion that urban environmental history was emerging in a number of places in Europe, but also the feeling that most scholars interested in the field were rather isolated and sometimes poorly understood in their universities and research centers. Inspired by the joint interest in the research topic and a number of positive signals from a growing number of colleagues in different academic contexts, a group of younger scholars agreed to continue the discussion and developed a network.

3. The Clermont-Ferrand conference, 2000

Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud took the initiative and developed, in a dialogue with Christoph Bernhardt, the concept for a follow-up conference at her home University Clermont-Ferrand, which they called “Round-Table”/“Table Ronde”. In the meantime, the European Society for Environmental History had been created,⁹ which could have contributed to the field of urban environmental history. But at that time there were few urban historians among its members, and many environmental historians still considered cities as “unnatural” artefacts, as a kind of predator of natural resources and unsustainable producer of pollu-

search for the ultimate sink. Urban pollution in historical perspective, Akron 1996; Martin Melosi, *The sanitary city. Urban infrastructure in America from colonial times to the present*, Baltimore 2000; Martin Melosi, *The place of the city in environmental history*, in: *Environmental History Review* 17:1, 1993, p. 1–23.

⁷ Cf. Joel Tarr, *Urban history and environmental history in the United States. Complementary and overlapping fields*, in: Christoph Bernhardt (Ed.), *Environmental Problems in European Cities in the 19th and 20th Century. Umweltprobleme in europäischen Städten den 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Münster 2001, p. 25–40.

⁸ Cf. Bernhardt, *Environmental Problems*.

⁹ For the mission of the association cf. <http://eseh.org/about-eseh/mission/> (31.10.2020).

tion. With the call for papers for the Clermont Round-Table, the agenda was set that the perspective should be widened beyond national borders, communities and single environmental nuisances towards a comparative and transnational European urban environmental history.¹⁰ The number of participants was limited to 30, with pre-circulated written papers and oral presentations covering a wide range of cases and regions. English and French were admitted as working languages and were partly mixed in oral and PowerPoint presentations, a concept which proved to be challenging.

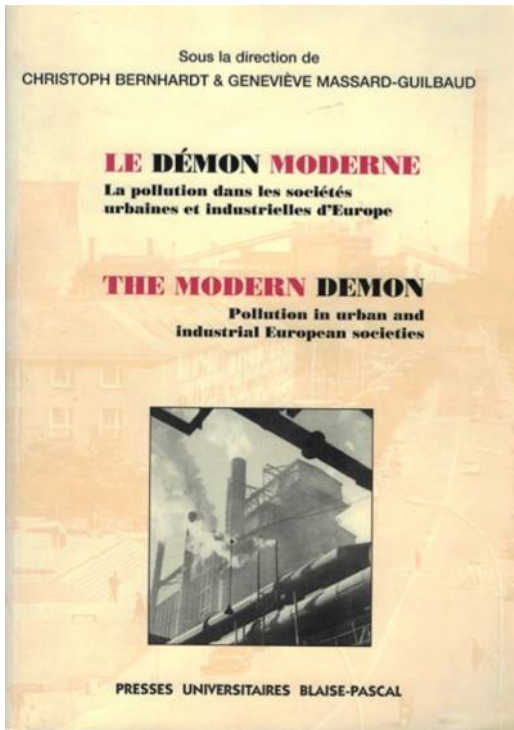


Fig. 1: Book „The modern demon“ (2002), Front cover.

Finally, 25 paper givers from nine countries were invited to the conference, amongst them a number of pioneers in the field (Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, André Guillerme, Bill Luckin, Simone Neri Seneri, Joachim Radkau, and Dieter Schott) as well as emerging scholars like Sabine Barles, Gabriella Corona, Jens Ivo Engels, Isabelle Parmentier, Lydia Sapounaki-Drakaki, Patrick Fournier, Tomomi Hotaka or Frank Uekötter. Most of them contributed to the bilingual book (French and English) “The modern Demon. Pollution in industrial and urban European societies”, edited by Christoph Bernhardt and Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud.¹¹ Four major topics were analyzed on more than 500 pages: 1. Pollution: The invention of a concept, 2. Pollution of air and water, 3. Cities and in-

¹⁰ The CfP stated: “Comparative history only delivers its real benefits when it goes beyond the mere juxtaposition of individual cases aiming at identifying similarities and differences, seeks to define new problematics ..., and allows us to better understand national histories and to integrate in our analysis non-national scales (local, regional, supranational)”.

¹¹ Christoph Bernhardt/Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud (Eds.), *Le démon moderne. La pollution dans les sociétés urbaines et industrielles d'Europe/The Modern demon. Pollution in urban and industrial European Societies*, Clermont-Ferrand 2002.

dustries, and 4. Social movements against pollution. Covering many dimensions of pollution, its perception, contestation and public discussion in various European countries, the US and Japan, the book became probably the most cited publication produced by the network.

4. The Leicester conference, 2002

Since the concept of the Round-Table had proved successful, Dieter Schott, at that time professor at the Centre for Urban History at Leicester University, volunteered to organize a second Round-Table in 2002. This conference was joined by previous as well as new participants and strongly opened the perspective towards North American cities, which Michele Dagenais (Montreal), Joel Tarr (Pittsburgh), Martin Melosi (Houston), and other colleagues discussed in their papers. As they had done two years earlier in Clermont, the participants also jointly explored urban, rural and gastronomic landscapes during memorable field walks and pub gatherings. From this second Round-Table a book on the “Resources of the City” came out, which was edited by Dieter Schott, Bill Luckin and Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud.¹² The volume presented a number of original topics and approaches, like the relation between horses, the city and urban infrastructures, problems and effects of vacation and lifestyles, allotment gardens, urban metabolisms and the value of concepts of path-dependency for urban history. In a critical retrospection, one could argue that the key term “resources” was perhaps used as an umbrella term in all contributions rather than as a strong analytical focus.

5. Limits in sight

After organizing one successful EAUH session and two Round-Tables, and publishing three books, the core group became increasingly aware of some limitations of the concept, but also expanded its activities. With regard to the limits, the team had to realize that the main goal of developing a comprehensive concept for the study of urban environmental history in a European perspective had only been partially realized. Most of the papers presented at the conferences were case studies from different national contexts, which followed different approaches and for which a synthesis was only drawn in the joint discussion. True transnational perspectives only emerged on a limited number of themes, such as the transfer and variations of the famous Napoleon “*commodo vel incommodo*” law from 1810, which set an early milestone in environmental

¹² Dieter Schott/Bill Luckin/Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud (Eds.), *Resources of the city. Contributions to an environmental history of Modern Europe*, London 2005.

legislation in Europe (even if historians agreed that its main goal was to protect property and industry, not the environment).¹³ Going a step further and organizing comprehensive transnational research would have meant developing a joint research project and applying for European funding, which the group discussed but did not pursue.



Fig. 2: The Scientific committee of the Round-Tables (Simone Neri Seneri, Gabriella Corona, Christoph Bernhardt, Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, Dieter Schott (from left to right), Sabine Barles is not present on the foto), Siena 2004.

6. The Siena, Paris, Berlin conferences, 2004, 2006 and 2008

Nonetheless, a third Round-Table following the same scheme was held close to Sienna in 2004, which Simone Neri Seneri generously organized together with Gabriella Corona in a former convent, the Certosa di Pontignano — a wonderful setting. The number of participants grew up to 40, 14 of which had attended the previous meeting. For the first time, scholars from Hungary, Spain, and Portugal were involved. Amongst the new participants were the distinguished American environmental historian Harold Platt from Chicago and Joan Martinez Alier from Barcelona, whose work on the “environmentalism of the poor” met with large interest. No book resulted from this meeting, but a substantial reader gathering the pre-circulated written papers was issued. The Round-Ta-

¹³ The large interest that this law attracted amongst scholars all over Europe was reflected in all three books in a number of articles which discussed the role of the law in different countries and periods.

ble was completed by marvelous field trips to places like Siena and San Gimignano.

The following event was held in Paris in 2006 and was organized by Sabine Barles, André Guillerme and Laurence Lestel at the Conservatoire national des Arts et Métiers. It was entitled “Milieu, Material and Materiality of European Cities in the 19th and 20th Centuries”. 26 participants attended, who came from an even larger number of countries, including Austria and Australia. Besides questions that were already approached at the previous meetings, such as waters and rivers, nuisances or sewers, new ones were brought up, like urban metabolism and material exchanges between cities and the countryside or the issue of sound. During this conference, the challenges of the bilingual concept of the Round-Tables became more apparent as a number of papers and discussions held in French were difficult to follow for the rest of the group.



Fig. 3: Poster Berlin Round-Table, 2008.

The final Round-Table “The place of the City in Environmental History” was organized in 2008 in Berlin by Christoph Bernhardt and Dorothee Brantz. About the same number of participants as in Paris discussed well established themes as well as new perspectives, such as on trees in Brazilian cities or on the co-evolution of urban biodiversity and the emergence of urban ecology as a science in post-war Berlin. Special attention was paid to the theoretical foundations, concepts and methodologies of urban environmental history. For this 5th Round-Table a substantial reader of written papers was compiled for the participants, who also undertook field trips to Tiergarten park and to the new Berlin Jewish Museum.

7. Expanding the field – terminating the conference series

Before drawing a conclusion, it is worth mentioning some activities related to the Round-Tables, which reflect the rapidly growing interest in urban environmental history more generally and highlight the side effects of the meetings in other areas of research. Around the early 2000s, members of the core group but also a growing number of other colleagues organized major sessions on urban environmental history at the EAUH conferences, so that urban environmental history became a well-known and established subfield of urban history. Books like “Cities and Catastrophes”¹⁴ or “Environmental and Social Justice in the City”¹⁵ marked this trend and explored key themes in the field. Furthermore, the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) increasingly opened its bi-annual conferences to urban issues, and Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud became strongly engaged as president of this association.

At the same time, some limits of the concept of the Round-Tables, which were mentioned above, became increasingly visible and problematic. At the end of the Berlin conference in 2008, the majority of participants agreed that the focus on the urban scale tended to cut off the strong links and the metabolism between cities and the countryside, that environmental history should be more consistently connected to the history of technology and economic history, and that the early modern period and long-term perspectives had been neglected.

Nonetheless, it can be said that the Round-Table conferences and books substantially contributed to developing a field of research that won a remarkable interest in broader contexts, so that this small-scale network had well fulfilled

¹⁴ Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud/Harold Platt/Dieter Schott (Eds.), *Cities and catastrophes. Villes et catastrophes*, Frankfurt am Main 2002.

¹⁵ Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud/Richard Rodger (Eds.), *Environmental and Social Justice in the City. Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge 2011.

its role as laboratory and incubator by 2008. Notwithstanding the ongoing strong interest of the members of the core group in the issue, the close personal ties and excellent cooperation, the network did not seem the appropriate format for the further promotion of the intellectual project of urban environmental history. But the collaboration was continued together with younger colleagues in other projects that explored new aspects of this fascinating and highly relevant field of urban environmental history.¹⁶

Source of Figures

Fig. 1: Foto Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud.

Fig. 2, 3: Fotos Christoph Bernhardt.

¹⁶ In recent years, amongst other topics city-river relations and the question of urban agency were discussed in a series of workshops and books. Cf. Martin Knoll/Uwe Lübken/Dieter Schott (Eds.), *Rivers lost, rivers regained. Rethinking City-River Relations*, Pittsburgh 2017; Tim Soens/Dieter Schott/Michael Toyka-Seyd/Bert De Munck (Eds.), *Urbanizing Nature. Actors and Agency (Dis)Connecting Cities and Nature since 1500*, New York/London 2019.