Cautionary Perspectives of Environmental History

Environmental history, strictly speaking, is an attempt to research and describe the past interactions of human societies and the natural world. Nevertheless, when an account of the past invites extrapolation into the future, environmental history can be said to offer a cautionary perspective—a warning to take measures to prevent history from repeating itself. This is of value, but sometimes creates the unfortunate impression that environmental history is dismal history. Audiences avoid environmental lectures because they have the impression that they will be harangued by pessimistic accounts of impending disasters. Environmental historians often encounter the Cassandra problem—they are heard but not believed, or they are believed but not heeded. As an example, history records a series of eruptions of Mount Vesuvius that indicate an impending disaster, but measures proposed to deal with such an event in the future are clearly inadequate. Critics of environmental history allege that it consists in large part of declensionist narratives, describing processes by which environmental situations become progressively worse due to human actions. Is this criticism justified? It is the task of environmental historians to make their narratives conform to the actual course of past events and to be critical of both declensionist and progressivist narratives. Sometimes the conclusion that environmental problems are getting worse is unavoidable, and that must be said. But cautionary tales also may include an element of possible improvement. Here the illustration of Gorongosa in Mozambique shows a healthy ecosystem full of animals that was successively decimated by hunting, a terrible war, destructive fires, and poaching. But a restoration program that includes ecological programs, improved infrastructure, and measures to involve and benefit surrounding communities, may reverse effects of past catastrophe. The history of international conferences and agreements on environmental issues offers another cautionary narrative. Successive United Nations environmental conferences have increasingly emphasized development at the expense of conservation. Their agreements contain little enforcement, and seem to have had lessening practical effects. One among a few encouraging exceptions is the Montreal Protocol (1987) on the reduction of chlorofluorocarbon production in order to lessen damage to the ozone layer. This has been effective, and offers an encouraging historical example. Similar success has until now eluded negotiations on reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to counter global warming. Environmental history suggests that humans are creative enough to find ways of ameliorating or reversing dangerous processes, but also reveals the perspective that knowledge has not always entailed accomplishment.

Ort: Hörsaal für Theoretische Physik, Linnéstraße 5
Alle Teilnehmer sind ab 16:30 Uhr zu Kaffee vor dem Hörsaal eingeladen.