Adaptation and Resilience to Droughts: Historical Perspectives in Europe and beyond

University of Strasbourg (France), June 1-2, 2017

Call for proposals

Scientific Background

“Ottmarsheim, 25th August (...). Approaching the village, one might be led to believe at first sight that one is facing a Saharan Ksour so much the soil is parched and bare due to the persistent drought”. That is how Charles Grad both scholar and erudite author of a rich book on the climate in Alsace at the end of the 19th century describes an Alsatian landscape. Literary pomposity or true description of reality?

Amongst existing research on environmental history and historical climatology, few is focused on droughts. Symposia have previously brought together researchers working on these topics but none has specifically concentrated on droughts. Relevant conferences include that in 2016 on the geohistory of the environment in Toulouse (France), that in 2012 on “Scorching heat and extreme cold. The climatic event and its representations” in Paris and that in 2011 on “Historical Climatology” (German Historical Institute) in Paris. Abroad we can also cite the sessions on “Historical hydrology: floods, droughts and ice floes” (International Conference of Historical Geographers, London, 2015) and “Recording, Visualizing and Disseminating Cultural Memories of Extreme Weather” (Second World Congress of Environmental History, Portugal, 2014).

This symposium will give us the chance of exploring a relatively new topic whose contributions in the international research community are still very diffuse. It aims to bring together researchers working on historical droughts mainly in France and Europe. Oral presentations illuminating adaptation and resilience of societies to droughts periods will be particularly appreciated. We will follow with interest Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s advice against all climatic determinism writing that “Climate continues to play its partition, its small destabilizing music along with the other sometimes ill-intentioned instruments and characters of the orchestra”.

Extreme events throughout history that challenge the reactive capacity (resilience and adaptation) of societies will be highlighted. The symposium will bring to light information provided by a large diversity of narrative sources. Lying at the crossroads between environmental history, historical climatology, geography and hydrology, it will provide an international and interdisciplinary scope. Droughts do not have any borders even if they can be managed differently according to national administrations. They have also been partly studied by researchers from different disciplines. However they still remain the poor cousin of the geohistory of risks or of historical climatology since floods, storms or harsh winters have given rise to more retrospective work. Thus a symposium focusing on these events is of utmost interest.
1 – Narratives sources for reconstructing droughts

In order to identify past droughts, researchers have several sources at their disposal. This first objective aims at highlighting and criticizing them. The following sources will be dealt with:

- Fluvial navigation (unemployment periods may be linked to droughts),
- Hungersteine (famine stones), witnesses of low water,
- Operation of water mills,
- Forest and settlement fires (sometimes induced by droughts),
- Industry along rivers,
- Drought sensitive agricultural production (spring cereals, hay, legumes, in extreme cases vines), also famines can succeed hot periods,
- Drying up of fountains and wells,
- Pro-pluvia Processions and Sermons (“for the rain”),
- Measures taken by authorities to save water,
- Spread of disease (in particular dysentery).

It will be also interesting to study the contribution of amateurs and persons with a passion for weather who noted weather conditions in their notebooks (including periods with low rainfall).

2 – The variability and the spatial extent of droughts

This axis focuses on the study of specific events: how can historical droughts be classified? According to their duration? Their impact on society? Their spatial extent? How can their role be evaluated in the destabilization of seasonally and societal rhythms? The following subjects are welcome:

- Reconstruction of certain significant episodes,
- High resolution study of the chronological sequence (hydrologic, climatic and societal) of droughts,
- Comparison between episodes of similar droughts,
- Work on drought periods that are intermittent with heavy rainy periods.

3 – Adaptation modes of societies

Because of their spatial extend and duration, some droughts have heavily marked societies. In order to face droughts, reactions are very diverse and this symposium hopes to confront them: how have inhabitants and administrations confronted these events according to their timing and spacing? Can one speak of resilience and how does it manifest itself? One could study:

- Demand for assistance concerning disasters following droughts,
- Compensation and insurance procedures,
- Projects of reservoir construction in order to guarantee water supply during dry periods,
- Water abstraction from rivers and rivalries in the choice of irrigation of certain fields as opposed to others,
- Persecution of minorities as arsonists.

4 – The memory of droughts

In 1780 an observer in Thann (Alsace) writes: “August beautiful and very hot. The drought lasted from Pentecost until the month of September with the exception of a few small thunderstorms. One cannot remember as long a drought before. We held public prayers everywhere”. Expressions such as “This has never been seen before” are a leitmotiv yesterday as much as today of the reactions when facing extreme events. Here we will see how the memory of droughts was kept alive or should be kept alive: how is it possible to maintain a better memory of extreme events and not be taken by surprise? This
axes generally fit well with the idea of a “risk culture” that is so much at the forefront nowadays. Different research fields emerge:
- Diffusion of knowledge on past droughts,
- Putting into value the images of droughts (postcards, paintings, photography…),
- Creation of bridges between memories of droughts and regional climatic projections,
- Setting up networks for collecting source excerpts from Europe and beyond,
- Cooperation between scientists working on droughts,
- Evaluation of possible consequences of the recurrence of certain extreme European droughts (such as 1540) for present-day societies

Scientific Programme Committee

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Guidelines for Paper Abstracts

We invite you to contact us by email before December 31st, 2016, with a one page abstract in English and French indicating how you would like to contribute to this research approach. Proposals from all disciplines are welcome. They should include: Title of the proposed paper, 5 key words and contact information (affiliation, e-mail).

We will review the abstracts and get back to you by January 15, 2017 to let you know whether your proposal has been accepted. Travel expenses will be covered for a selection of young researchers. An international publication (either an edited collection or special issue of a journal) is planned.

The two day symposium consists of different sessions. The conference language is English. Presenters of accepted papers are asked to speak for 15-20 minutes. A fee of 100 € (50 € for PhD students) will be charged to cover coffee breaks and lunch.

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