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"Conquests from Barbarism": Interpreting Land Reclamation in 18th Century Prussia.

This paper draws on material from a larger project. I have chosen to present a part, rather than an overview of the whole, for two main reasons. First, a sense of place is crucially important to any kind of environmental history, and trying to cover too much ground in 20 pages would have diluted that attention to place. Secondly, I have deliberately chosen material that might lend itself to transnational comparison. William Cronon has argued that environmental history has the advantage of eroding boundaries between historical sub©fields. I think he is right in general, but perhaps too optimistic when he extends the argument to include different national histories. Herr Radkau, for example, asks if there is a "European "Sonderweg•" in environmental history. Whether there is or not, I hope that my paper raises some issues that go beyond Germany alone.

Let me begin by quoting some verse written in 1848, year of European revolutions. It describes "a mighty vassal" in the Prussian marches who "stormed through hearth and home" until a royal hero "drove him from the field". Who was he? "Der überwund'ne Mächtige/Ist unser Oderstrom/Und sein Gebiet das Oderbruch;/Der Held, der ihn in Fesseln schlug,/Stieg auf zum Himmelsdom. The "enemy" was the River Oder, his terrain the Oder marshes, until Frederick the Great "cast him in chains".

This undistinguished verse captures one of my central themes: human mastery over the natural world. Its author, Carl Heuer (a dyke inspector), was referring to the draining and settlement of the Prussian Oderbruch one hundred years earlier, one of the best known of many such projects. These undertakings provide the focus of my paper: The motives that drove them, how they were realized, the resistance they encountered, and their double-edged effects. This subject will occupy the first chapter of a book I am currently working on, called "The Conquest of Nature: Water and the Making of the Modern German Landscape". The book will carry the story on through the 19th and 20th centuries, dealing also with river-regulation, dam-building and the exploitation of "white coal" or hydro-electric power, as well as the continuing projects to drain moor, marsh and fen.

I am interested in the physical process of transforming the land. It seems to me that the time is ripe for the historical pendulum to swing back some way towards the material; not all places are "imagined". But I am also interested in what people thought they were doing -- and in what those who opposed them thought they were doing. As Carl Heuer's doggerel suggests, reclamation projects were heavy with political and cultural meanings (that is no less true of, say, regulating the Rhine). Even more than the other elements, water has lent itself to a wide variety of metaphorical uses, from creation myths onwards. A German historian thinks of Leopold von Ranke's idea that History, like a river, "flowed", or of the ways that 19th-century conservatives represented revolution as a "flood" against which "dykes" had to be erected. Conversely, we should listen to the language used by contemporaries when they wrote about hydrological enterprises, and not view these projects in narrowly material or technical terms. Environmental history will not only gain the widest audience (inside and outside the profession) but also work best when it places human interactions with the natural world in the broadest cultural, social and political context. The original programme of the "Annales• school remains exemplary: Total history is impossible, but we can aspire to it.

By starting in the 18th century I do not want to suggest that nothing relevant to my subject happened before then, or imply any simple distinction between "pre-modern" and "modern". One virtue of (much) environmental history is its long sweep, its capacity to call into question narratives

that turn on a pre-modern/modern axis, especially those closely linked to industrialization. Attempts to tame and harness German waters were, of course, legion in the medieval period, from the water-wheel to the fish-ponds and drainage schemes of the Cistercians. Then in the 16th and 17th centuries there was mounting activity to drain land and settle it in areas such as Ostfriesland, the Jeverland and Schleswig-Holstein, not to mention the "Holländereien" established in Prussia by the Great Elector.

Yet the changes that occurred from the mid-18th century did represent something different. Earlier initiatives, whether mounted by princes or individual nobles, had been piecemeal. The new projects were more extensive, more comprehensive. The greater scale of the ambition matched the greater resources of the state. What was new in Frederick's reign was not access to Dutch hydraulic specialists; the Great Elector and Frederick William I had also used Dutch engineers. The novelty was the growing expertise in land surveying, map-making, statistics and the mechanical arts available to the absolutist ruler. Whereas for example, earlier efforts had tackled parts of the Oderbruch on an ad hoc basis, the reclamation project begun in 1747-53 followed a comprehensive plan that remade the river and eventually released some 150,000 acres for new uses. Something similar was happening across Prussia (but not only there): in the Warthe- and Netzebruch, on the Dosse and Rhin, in the Wustrauer Luch, in the havelländisches Luch, on the island of Usedom.

Reclamation schemes had a number of different motives. They were designed to create new land on which colonists could be settled as part of Frederician *Peuplierungspolitik* (a thousand new villages were created during the reign). They would also increase the food supply to support a growing population: Early drainage projects in the Electoral March were intended to provision Berlin, just as the Dutch drained inland lakes in the 17th century to feed Amsterdam. At the same time, the cuts (*Durchstiche*) that altered the course of rivers like the Oder as a prelude to reclamation -forerunners of Johann Tulla's large-scale 19th-century scheme of Rhine-rectification- were intended both to foster commerce by improving navigability, and to prevent major floods like those that occurred nine times in the Oderbruch between 1698 and 1737.

These were the applied lessons of cameralist science, designed to maximise resources. But there was something more. Inseparably intertwined with them was the motif of a tamed or conquered nature. Historians often quote from one of Frederick the Great's letters to Voltaire: "True riches consist only of that which comes out of the earth". The following sentence is just as important: "Whoever improves the soil, cultivates land lying waste and drains swamps, is making conquests from barbarism". Here was the authentic voice of 18th-century enlightened absolutism. Like other contemporary rulers, Frederick sought (in Henning Eichberg's formulation) to "order, measure, discipline". This applied to soldiers and subjects, to land and raw materials, to gardens -and to nature itself, where the Creator had left dark or "barbarous" corners that served no "useful" purpose.

Such opinions, common ground among the educated, did not apply only to marshes. Reclamation projects ran in parallel with other notable efforts to master nature. One was the campaign to control wildfires and peasant "fire farming" (*Brandwirtschaft*) that state forestry officials considered to be dangerously irrational. (This was of more than local importance, for just as the Dutch provided Europe with its hydraulic engineers, the German states now began to export "scientific forestry" officials to Europe and the European colonies.) Another was the hunting to virtual extinction in these years of bear, lynx, wolf and other creatures. In fact, this was often linked by contemporaries to reclamation. August Gottlob Meissner wrote in 1782 that before the draining of the Warthebruch "no plough had ever been here, no human industry had ever sought its fortune... one encountered nothing but swamp and dense undergrowth, the habitation of snakes and wolves". Kammer-Rat

Stubenrauch of the Order of St John noted in 1787, also of the Warthebruch: "The whole region remained for a long time a dwelling place for wild animals, wolves, not infrequently bears, otters and other vermin of every kind".

The contemporary justification for human intervention was that man, "the lords and masters of nature" (in Descartes' words), the "master of the domain of earth" (in Buffon's), had a right and duty to "repair" or "improve" *natura lapsa*. Perhaps on no other subject, however, was there such agreement as there was on the need to drain marshland. Whether we look at Buffon and Montesquieu in France, William Falconer and William Robertson in Britain, or Johann Reinhold Forster and Georg Forster in Germany, the story is the same. Just as rulers and officials suspected marsh and fen as the breeding grounds of superstition and places that harboured disorderly human elements like deserters and bandits, so writers on natural history were agreed in viewing them as dark, disorderly corners of nature, where vegetation and animal bodies decayed, emitting noxious-smelling and unhealthy miasmas. The solution: To let in air and sunlight so that the recovered land could be put to use.

And that is what happened. We are dealing with a real-life version of the human mastery over nature that we find in *Faust*, Part II ("Green are the meadows, fertile; and in mirth,/Both men and herds live in this newest earth."). But in *Faust* a price is paid; the "conquest" is ambiguous. Historians need to find a way of writing about these events that (1) avoids a teleological account of progress and "modernization", and its simple mirror-image of lament for a lost world; (2) does justice to the complexity of both short-term and long-term results; and (3) is alive to the importance of unintended consequences.

So let us consider what happened after the reclamation of areas like the Oderbruch. The brave new world of dykes, ditches, windmills, fields and meadows undeniably deliver many benefits. New land was created for colonists, the food supply was increased. The reclaimed land often proved exceptionally rich and productive, nowhere more so than the Oderbruch. As the soil dried out, the livestock raising of the early years was joined by a very diverse arable farming -rye, wheat, oats, barley, clover, specialized cash crops. The Oderbruch was a kind of laboratory case of "improved" farming. It was appropriate that a pioneer of scientific agriculture, Daniel Albrecht Thaer, should have settled there -at Möglin- in 1804, where he published the four volumes of his "Principles of Rational Agriculture". Later commentators, who so often looked down on the Bruch (as Frederick had always done) from the surrounding heights, invariably painted the same picture. This was a "blooming province" (Walter Christiani), a "green land in the sandy marches", "a large and beautiful garden" (Ernst Breitreuz).

The Oderbruch also did well by its inhabitants -those who farmed and later owned the new land, at any rate. By the third decade of the 19th century, the Oderbruch peasant had acquired a reputation for acquisitiveness that was striking even by prevailing standards of official and bourgeois criticism. The red-tiled and green-shuttered farmhouses, the carriages and finery, the consumption of tobacco and wines, the cards and skittles -these were the conventional symbols of vulgar prosperity. Few were more sardonic than Theodor Fontane, in the *Wanderungen* and novels such as *Unterm Birnbaum*. Yet Fontane had no doubt that a "barren and worthless marshland" had been transformed into "the granary of our land". The promised opportunities held out by Frederician colonist-recruiters had apparently been redeemed. Moreover, reclamation meant also that malaria was no longer endemic, just as 19th-century river-rectification was to drive it from the Upper Rhine valley. Not only was standing water removed as a breeding ground. The "new husbandry" of livestock and dairy farming provided the malaria-carrying anopheles mosquito with a preferred

source of blood; but the malarial plasmodium does not find cattle a suitable host, so the mosquito's preference for cattle blood broke the chain of malaria transmission to humans.

It was benefits like these that Paul Wagret, a modern Dutch expert on reclamation, had in mind when he wrote in 1959 of "the conquest of marshlands by civilization". Few of us today could summon up such unqualified enthusiasm (although we need to register and understand those who could), bracketing out the human and environmental costs of that conquest. A good way to begin examining the human cost is by looking at the actual process of reclamation and the problems it presented. This may seem an odd starting-point. After all, generations of writers have written about this in epic mode, as testimony to the heroic accomplishments of Frederick and his officials in overcoming every obstacle. Yet there is much to be learned from interrogating this narrative. Reclamation projects faced problems at two levels. At the centre, the obstacles included noble vested interest, constant financial problems, and bureaucratic inertia; all of which led Frederick to cut corners by setting up special funds and appointing trouble-shooters (Brenkenhoff, Domhardt) to force through his projects, men who in turn cut corners in ways that left their imprint on the completed -or half-completed-schemes. On the ground, projects were dogged by unforeseen hydrological problems, outbreaks of fever that cost lives and made already serious labour shortages worse, and resistance from local inhabitants that ranged from non-cooperation to sabotage. The initial phase of the Oderbruch improvement was completed in six years only after construction was placed under military guard and soldiers were drafted in as labourers.

Frederick the Great reportedly said: "Here I have conquered a province in peace". The military metaphor is apt -but the process was hardly "peaceful". Fontane was closer to the mark when he referred to "a silently conducted Seven Years War". Violence was the midwife of reclamation. It was directed partly at the construction workforce, but mainly at those who resisted the transformation of their world. This pattern repeated what had happened during the drainage of the English Fens in the 17th century; and it was to repeat itself again during the Rhine-rectification in 19th-century Germany, when military intervention was also required.

The old Oderbruch contained a scatter of villages built on higher sandy mounds. Their inhabitants were amphibious. They lived primarily as fishermen, from the rich stocks of carp, perch, pike, bream, barbel, ide, tench, lamprey, burbot, eel and crabs. (*Microstoria* has taught us to name names; should we not name species, too?) But they also produced hay and pastured animals when water-levels were lower, using animal dung mixed with mud and bundles of twigs to construct protective walls against floods, and on those walls they grew vegetables. For much of the year, except during lower water and winter ice, communication was by water. This way of life was destroyed. The former marsh-dwellers received new land as compensation, and their children and grandchildren of course adapted (as we say) to the new regime of terra firma. But there is plenty of evidence about those who clung defiantly, painfully to a world that was disappearing.

It is true that before the change these marsh-dwellers had hardly lived free from external constraints, such as the monopoly power of the fish-processors' guild in Wriezen, on the edge of the Bruch. And the harshness of their environment discourages any idealization, notwithstanding golden-age myths about extraordinary longevity. On the other hand, their way of life was neither so irrational nor so abjectly vulnerable to the elements as officials often assumed. Their economy was carefully geared to the normal cycle of floods that occurred, before the reclamation, each spring and summer. Like the inhabitants of the Havelland and east Má ánsterland recently examined by Rita Gudermann, they had evolved small-scale local solutions that permitted them to survive and fashion a livelihood from the waters until large-scale state "improvement" came along. Gudermann's line of argument, plausible in its attention to the detail of peasant resourcefulness and

ingenuity, has been developed on a larger scale by James C. Scott in his book "Seeing like a State", a broad-brush critique of technological hubris and state power riding roughshod over local conditions and cultivators. Clearly, we should not fall into the trap of sentimentalizing the old ways, a point Scott is careful to make. Still, the narrative of loss records an important truth, and suggests one of the registers in which we should tell the history of reclamation.

Meanwhile, the first two generations -at least- of incoming colonists also paid a high price in establishing the basis for later prosperity. Again, we should remember the process of reclamation. The years-long projects on the Oder, Warthe, Netze and elsewhere only created the preconditions for settlements -the cuts in the rivers, the major dykes and embankments. The work of turning the geometrical grids of planned colonies into reality still had to be done by the incomers -ditching and dyking the future agricultural land, pulling up the old vegetation and planting willows by the new drainage channels, preparing the still intractable soil, building paths and bridges, all the while trying to maintain the defences against the water. Disease and heavy labour culled their ranks; many widows showed up in the "tables" of colonists compiled for Frederick's scrutiny. The original houses, often built too quickly with skimpy foundations, subsided and even collapsed. Animals died from infections after grazing on still water-logged meadows. As the colonist saying went: "The first generation meets with death, the second with privation, only the third with prosperity". (The original German rhymes *Tod, Not* and *Brot*.) Some moved on, or returned home, like the luckless Herr Paulsen. In his first year at Neu-Rüdnitz in the Oderbruch he and his wife were robbed and assaulted by a band of Cossacks. In the second year he lost 14 head of cattle to disease and had three horses stolen. In the third year his fields were flooded, weeds ruined half his crop and a plague of mice ate the rest. In the fourth year he was flooded out again, losing all of his pigs and poultry. Then he sold up and went home.

Of course, all settler or "frontier" societies have a stock of stories about epic struggles and hard times (the Western Frontier, the Great Trek). But the detail of these stories yields important evidence about the costs of reclamation. For example, the diseases and infections of humans and livestock, the infestations of mice and weeds -these were not just "bad luck". A central theme of environmental history has always been the complex problems that arise when humans migrate from one ecosystem to another; for people carry their biota and pathogens with them -in this case, from across much of Europe, including Bohemia, Austria, Switzerland, Swabia, the Palatinate, Denmark, France, the Low Countries, Piedmont and Savoy. It should be said that some of the familiar disasters of development were largely avoided on these reclaimed lands. The rich alluvial soil (although not everywhere as rich as in the Oderbruch) did not suffer -or has not yet suffered- the soil exhaustion found in some other marginal, especially upland, areas brought into cultivation or used more intensely. Polycropping -or, at least, mixed farming- helped here, in sharp contrast to the crisis that eventually overtook the monocropped German pine forests. And topography meant that soil erosion was not the problem that it was in other areas.

There was erosion, however, as a result of the flooding that continued to occur in the reclaimed marshes -in the Oderbruch, for example, in the 1750s, the 1770s, the 1830s, the 1880s, the 1890s, and on into the 20th century. The reasons were many. Either the work of reclamation was left incomplete (as it was at the western end of the Warthebruch); or older patterns asserted themselves (such as the "New Oder" silting up its bed, as the river had always done); or the improvement schemes had unforeseen consequences, as water squeezed out of one place returned in another (which happened almost everywhere to some degree). Each major setback led to a rethinking; and each time -this is a really striking pattern- the new measures would supposedly turn the trick and finally overcome the ignorance, or engineering mistakes, or political constraints of earlier

generations, right down to Werner Michalsky's 1983 claim that under GDR planning "the centuries-old dream of humanity to control the forces of nature has been realized under socialist conditions".

The reality was that (taking the Oderbruch once again as an example) none of these supposedly definitive solutions -not raising the height of dykes after the inundations of the 1770s, not blocking off the "Old Oder" following a major flood in 1830, not the large corrective scheme in the 1850s, not the advent of steam pumps and dredgers, not the new plan in the 1920s that used electrically-powered pumps, not the repeated reorganizations of Dyke Associations -none of these steps was able to prevent floods that were now a threat to the work-cycle rather than a part of it. Over a period of more than two centuries, no definitive security against the water could be established in these reclaimed lands. Instead, in a sequence familiar from the Rhine to the Mississippi, floods became less frequent but more catastrophic when they did occur, right down to 1997.

More than 200 years later, it is also possible to gain some perspective on the environmental consequences of reclamation. Some of the impact was felt early and dramatically. A contemporary described what happened in the Oderbruch after the rooting up of the former tangled, waterlogged undergrowth. Left in huge piles for months to dry out, it became a refuge for wildlife of every kind. Then, when light was finally set to the wood, animals and birds fled the fire and smoke, an easy prey -wild cats, weasels, martens, foxes, wolves, deer, hares, wild ducks, fen chickens. Theodor Fontane, who later recycled the incident in his *Wanderungen*, called it a "war of extermination" (*Vernichtungskrieg*). But the real extent of the change went beyond violent episodes like this. These had been rich wetland habitats, a complex ecosystem of land and water, trees, bushes, reeds and trailing lianas that supported diverse insect, fish, bird and animal life. 18th-century writers, who have to be read against the grain since most deplored what was there before reclamation, provide some striking descriptions. The Havelland marsh had been "a savage, primitive land, as the hand of nature had created it, a counterpart to the primeval forests of South America". Another contemporary said of the old Warthebruch that "anyone who had dared to enter it would have felt himself transposed to one of the most unknown parts of the world". A Danish traveller compared the already reclaimed parts of the Warthebruch -whose "beauty" was "paradisiacal"- with the "Canadian wilderness" that still remained untouched. As the 18th century gave way to the 19th, and the 19th to the 20th, this story came to be told more often in a different way. Greater emphasis was placed on the flora and fauna that had been so carelessly sacrificed -the development of ornithology and the emergence of a strong bird-protection movement provide just one example. A sharper eye was turned to losses as well as gains, including under the former the "green monotony" often touched on by Fontane. By the time we get to a pessimistic, ecologically-minded writer in the 1950s like Hans Künkel, whose ancestors came from both the Oderbruch and Warthebruch, that Danish traveller's scale of values has been reversed. It is no longer the reclaimed land that is a paradise, but the wetlands in their pristine state: "A paradise of creatures great and small, and especially of birds". A paradise lost, in other words.

Most historians regard the rhetoric of paradise and golden ages with great scepticism. But some environmental historians have been drawn to the idea of a natural world that was stable and self-equilibrating, until disturbed by a human impact that brought instability and disequilibrium. This impulse owes a good deal to the holistic categories of Romanticism that tinged early ecological thinking. If, as I suggested earlier, the great illusion of the technocratic modernizers was the belief that *they* had found a once-for-all, definitive "solution", the opposite snare for green-minded historians has been the tendency to believe in a once-for-all state of nature. That, however, is certainly not the conclusion to be drawn from present-day ecologists, who place greater emphasis on, for example, the disturbance-dependence of species and the unstable dynamism of natural systems. And to the extent that environmental historians suspect the application of chaos theory

within ecology and remain attached to organic metaphors of nature (the influential American scholar Donald Worster comes to mind), it may be that we are dealing with another example of historians borrowing ideas from another discipline even as those ideas come under fire within the discipline itself (a familiar story when it comes to historians and the social sciences). That does not mean we lack any basis on which to write about the destructive human impact on the natural world, including the accelerating pace of that impact even before the fossil-fuel-based era of industrialization. In the marshlands and swamps I have been discussing, reclamation clearly led to a devastating loss of biodiversity. But we should recognize that we are dealing with the dynamic interaction of two dynamic systems.

When we look at these apparently pristine wetland habitats, another basic question arises. To what extent was this, in fact, a "land created by the hand of nature" (to quote that 18th^a century commentator again)? Within fairly recent history it had clearly been shaped and reshaped - although less dramatically than in the second half of the 18th century- by various local systems of human exchange with the natural environment. If we go back 500 years, there is evidence that a combination of climatic change and human actions (deforestation, depressions caused the exploitation of bog-iron deposits) had severely disrupted the hydrological balance in many of these silt valleys of the north German plain, causing catastrophic floods in the 13th century that drove settlements to higher ground. In the following centuries, fishermen and hunter-gatherers in areas like the Oderbruch and Warthebruch not only developed their own micro-economies, but become linked to local markets (Wriezen, Frankfurt, Landsberg). The role played by nobles or towns with hunting rights in these wetlands raises another issue. There is a fine depiction of the ecological old regime in a Jacob Ruisdael painting called "Interior of the woods with huntsman"; but as we gaze at Ruisdael's wooded waterworld we realize that the *raison d'etre* of this picture is -the huntsman. The 3000-strong herd of deer reported from the 17th-century Warthebruch owed as much to the hand of man as the hand of nature. In fact, almost all of the areas I have been talking about were hunting preserves before they became pastures or fields of corn -which is why so many Prussian nobles also protested the process reclamation.

Much else that we might be tempted to view as aspects of a natural habitat was also a partial by-product of human interventions. Water levels had sometimes been raised by surrounding mills. The adaptation of upland streams for wood rafting or to power hammer mills had a hydrological impact on lowland marshes. Alluvial deposits occurred in flood-prone river valleys because of topsoil erosion caused by deforestation in distant uplands. There is, in fact, no obvious baseline for measuring the world that was "lost" during reclamation. To put it in the sharp terms used by Elizabeth Ann Bird, it is possible to "argue against environmentally destructive technologies, but not on the grounds that they are anti-natural".

Nature, as we all know, is a construct: a "rhetorical place in our language" (Donna Haraway). Of course there is a natural history of climate, soils, waters, vegetation, disease, animals. But we know and conceptualize nature (*Natur an sich*, for Germans writers) at second hand, through the lenses of our human beliefs, cultures and structures of knowledge. We could not "think like a river" (Donald Worster) even if we wanted to. I mentioned earlier how often those who described the Oderbruch literally looked down on it from above, just as Matthäus Merian did for his 17th-century engraving of the Zehden marshes. This neatly symbolises a problem of perspective for historians. We are like Theodor Fontane, bitter-sweetly recording the "declining power" or "loss of character" of the marshlands, yet forever framing a kind of panorama. To which I would add -without wishing to slight what we can learn from geology, dendrology or pollen analysis- that an important part of what we know about the object of our attention is owed, paradoxically, to communications that heralded its the demise. The lost wetlands were never so familiar as when they were disappearing.

My favourite example of this perspectival problem is that great friend of the moors, the Worpswede painter Otto Modersohn. He confided to his diary that "nature is our teacher", then noted that he had this not very original thought "on the bridge that leads over the canal".

That might be a good place to end. But I want to make a final point that is not only important in its own right, but offers some links to the place of environmental history within other national stories. Those references I quoted earlier to South American forests and Canadian wilderness remind us that for German (and other European) writers in the 18th century the New World was an major reference-point for developments in the Old. When it came to draining marshes, some were already drawing on New World material to warn about the consequences of human arrogance. The Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm pointed to changing climate and reduced numbers of fish and birds where swamps had been cleared in North America, urging his own countrymen not to be "blind to the future". Herder, using similar evidence, insisted that nature was "a living whole", not to be "mastered by force". More commonly, however, American wilderness still denoted lack of civilization. It is no accident that new settlements in the Warthebruch bore confidently American names like Maryland, Florida, Philadelphia and Charleston, to signify the arrival of a "superior" new culture.

These European parallels with the Americas expressed contempt towards "uncultivated" peoples within Europe itself. In the German case, this meant Poles, and the motif runs through the 18th-century history of Prussian reclamation. The line of the Prussian "improvements" ran eastwards. It began immediately to the east of Berlin in the Electoral March, then crossed the Oder to the Warthe and Netze marshes before turning south-east towards Silesia and north-east, to newly acquired parts of Pomerania and above all to West Prussia, the booty from the first Polish partition. On the eastern margins of protean Prussia, reclamation and settlement "secured" the border -for how could you protect or even define a frontier that was under water half the year?

Officials carried contempt for the indigenous Poles with them. The draining of the Oderbruch was intended to plant good German colonists where "superstitious" Wendish fishermen had lived, a mental connection that was even stronger when it came to the new eastern territories. Frederick's own views on "the slovenly Polish trash" of West Prussia were expressed in unflattering New World parallels. They were like "Iroquois". Or: "I have seen this Prussia; I believe Canada is better cultivated". This was "a barbarous people sunk in ignorance and stupidity" (note the metaphorical undertones of the French verb "croupir" -sunk in, wallowing in, stagnating). Officials used similar terms; so did intellectuals like Georg Forster, whose scandalized writings from Vilnius about Polish "backwardness" resembled his accounts of "ignorance and barbarism" in the Pacific. There is probably no need to belabour this anti-Slav dimension to the Prussian self-understanding of what it meant to win "conquests from barbarism". In the final chapter of my larger study I shall explore the long career enjoyed by these ideas of German technological superiority, and specifically of hydrological improvement, through the first half of the 20th century. The chapter is provisionally called "The Epic of Colonization" -although, given the extraordinary frequency with which the word "green" appears in literary, historical and economic texts, I am tempted to call it "The Greening of the East". Needless to say, the meaning of "green" in this discourse (the "new green of German industriousness" "versus• Polish "swamps and morasses", German "cheerful green" "versus• Polish "wasteland") is very different from use of the word among environmentalists today.

A few concluding remarks. Human interaction with the natural world, the physical environment of water, soils, vegetation and animals, deserves a larger place in mainstream history. This historical approach faces special problems of acceptance in Germany. It is not just that more conservatives scholars are indifferent or hostile to the environmental perspective. Many pioneers of an

"emancipatory" social history in Germany also keep their distance: They are concerned that "anti-modernism" lurks behind "green" history, and behind that anxiety lie powerful negative associations with crude environmental determinism and blood-and-soil writing in the 1920s and 1930s. Of course, this is unfair to those who write German environmental history today. So the question arises: Why not simply get on with the work of environmental history, which poses questions that are important in their own right? My answer would be that if the environmental perspective is to become part of mainstream history, these political and cultural associations cannot be avoided. In the USA, after all, the New Western History has helped to recast our understanding of the American past -of American history as a whole- by addressing these questions, not avoiding them.

My paper has been concerned with changes in the natural world. In the postmodern era of history after the linguistic turn, it is important to defend the legitimacy of a materialist history. Sometimes, reading yet another book or article on another "imagined place", it is tempting to echo Gertrude Stein and complain that "there is no there there". But: This is not to be misconstrued as a plea to turn our backs on the cultural and political meanings attached to the physical landscape. Quite the contrary. An environmental history capable of having an impact on mainstream history must also concern itself with "geographies of the mind" and human constructs of the natural world. Nature - "perhaps the most complex word in the language" (Raymond Williams)- is a nodal point where the environmental, economic, social, cultural and political come together. Christof Dipper's fine history of Germany from 1648 to 1789 has a pair of neatly twinned chapters -Die Herrschaft der Natur, Die Natur der Herrschaft. Let me end by paraphrasing him: By understanding the human dominance of nature, we learn more about the nature of human dominance.