

Water Systems and Societies

The Advanced Study Group of Water

Why do we want to study water? The reason that we have invited scholars from six different faculties to a study group on water is to use water as a “lens” to study and understand several problems that emerge in the points of contact between nature, technology and society. To do this, we wish to create a meeting place where people from different backgrounds can learn from each other, and form core groups for possible future research collaboration.

The study group arranges seminars around three main topics or “levels” of understanding.

a) The first deals with the fundamental materiality of water and waterscapes. Water is a taken-for-granted precondition of life and the origin of life. It is everywhere, and still particularistic and local. Knowledge of water needs chemistry, geophysics, hydrology and ecosystems geography. The history of rivers and precipitation is a history of ever-changing preconditions for life. Without some understanding of the grammar of water, we will never understand what happens on the human side of the intersection between water and society.

A seminar with the heading “What’s so special about water” with contributions from the history of theory of science and from physical chemistry has already been held, and a seminar on hydrology is scheduled for the spring term.

b) Human actors have tried to use and control rivers, lakes and rainwater as long as we have been living on earth. No waterscapes are completely artificial, but fewer than we want to believe are all natural. The second topic has to do with both the practical aspect of water management and engineering, such as pumping, drilling, damming, embanking, piping, and drains digging and, on the other hand, the motives, claims and interests that have been interlinked with these material practices. The revolution in sanitation helped to create the city for the 19th Century homo hygienicus, and today “city” is unthinkable without “water management”. Science has formed our views on what can be done to nature, and lately, what cannot and should not be ventured.

The first seminar in the ongoing series was dedicated to ancient – especially Roman -water technology.

c) The third topic for study has to do with conflict and unequal access to water, because that furthers state control, legislation and power arrangements which are closely interconnected with other political structures. Institutions regulate material water-work, but at the same time, they express beliefs and ideologies, opinions on right and wrong. Ideas and tales of water as pure, natural and innocuous tend to clash with realities. The change in water supplies or control over water, and how this change comes about through social and human action create new conditions for development, settlement, social life, production and thus becomes the object of political control, controversies and armed conflict.