

# Abstracts

## **An Impure Nature: Memory and the Neo-Materialist Flip at America's Biggest Toxic Superfund Site**

**Timothy James LeCain**

In 1995, more than 300 migrating snow geese perished after landing in the flooded Berkeley Pit, a toxic open pit copper mine in the northwestern United States. Many commentators subsequently saw the snow geese as symbols of a pure natural world destroyed by the impure artificiality of humans and their technologies. In this essay, however, I avoid such oppositions by drawing on new materialist theoretical approaches that reject anthropocentric thinking and instead emphasize the powerful materiality of cultural phenomena, both for humans and snow geese. This “neo-materialist flip” suggests that industrial artifacts like the Berkeley Pit defy modernist categories of natural and artificial, or pure and impure, because they are simultaneously both material and cultural. Hence the enduring material reality of the pit persists as a site of memory that will both create and embody the culture of snow geese, humans, and countless other living things for centuries to come.

## **GAU: Nuclear Reactors and the “Maximum Credible Accident”**

**Joachim Radkau**

This essay traces the history of the nuclear risk discourse and policy in West Germany from the first use of the term GAU in the 1960s to the present. A close examination of the term reveals that it is in fact ambiguous, oscillating between support of nuclear energy and criticism of it. GAU, which stands for “größter anzunehmender Unfall”, is a translation of the English “maximum credible accident”, the greatest possible accident that was conceivable under realistic conditions and one that reactors were supposedly designed to be able to withstand. However, from the beginning it was a fictional construct used by the nuclear industry to receive permission for building; it was not the result of either safety-related experiments or theoretical discussions by the experts. Over time the word

underwent a shift in meaning and was used by the anti-nuclear community to refer to a worst-case scenario – an accident that could no longer be controlled. This change in meaning reflects a hidden “revolution” within the community of American and West German reactor safety experts during the 1960s who challenged the validity of the concept.

## **Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme: Britain’s Largest Colonial Agricultural Development Project and Its Global Legacy**

**Stefan Esselborn**

In the late 1940s, the British state embarked on an attempt to convert about 12,000 square kilometers of bush land in remote regions of colonial East Africa into a peanut monoculture. The project, which became known simply as the “Groundnut Scheme”, constituted one of the largest colonial agricultural development initiatives in history, as well as possibly the most spectacular failure in this field. While the technical reasons for this are relatively well known, this article focuses chiefly on perceptions and memories of the Scheme, trying in particular to trace the different functions that were assigned to the social and ecological landscape of Tanganyika. As the Scheme was from the outset targeted as much at Western discourses and representations as at the actual situation in Tanganyika, three layers of context are distinguished, corresponding broadly to different geographical scales as well as specific groups of actors. On the imperial level, the project’s entanglement in British politics tended to obscure its geographic and historical specificities, transforming the transformation of Tanganyikan landscape into sets of statistical numbers, and ultimately into a largely decontextualized political buzzword. Secondly, in the framework of the international expert community, technological enthusiasm depicted East Africa as an “empty” region formable at will, despite scientific evidence to the contrary. Ironically, the mistakes and miscalculations resulting from this were so numerous and at times grotesque that they allowed a more general questioning of the basic tenets of agricultural development to be avoided. At a “local” level, the Groundnut Scheme should be understood in the context of attempts to reform the (post-) colonial social order through the modification of agricultural practices and the refashioning of the physical and ecological environment. In this sense, the project became a forerunner of the even larger Tanzanian “villagization” campaign in the 1970s. Different strands of memory of the Groundnut Scheme persist today, although their connection to the physical site(s) of the project is often tenuous. On the other hand, the Scheme did transform the social, physical, and biological landscape of Tanganyika, albeit in very different ways and in a much more limited fashion than intended.

## **Fossilized Memory: The German-Russian Energy Partnership and the Production of Energo-political Knowledge**

**Jeannette Prochnow**

The German-Russian energy cooperation on the natural gas market began with the discovery of the Urengoi gas field in 1966. Both German states invested heavily in the Russian natural gas market. This partnership has continued long after the collapse of socialism and today is more relevant than ever. These bilateral economic relations were accompanied by extensive media coverage in both German states as well as in the unified state, with the result that, today, the cooperation is referred to as a “tradition” of 40 years. Over the past decades German energy companies, politicians, and the media have fashioned a communicative field that turned the import of Russian gas into a *res publica*, the particularities of which are examined in this paper. The case exemplifies how the flow of resources across political borders has gravitated around the historicity of social memory. However, the exploitation and use of natural resources occupy a precarious place in public collective thought. Firstly, because the media coverage of German-Russian energy politics is connected to Germany’s past, the discourse has tended to show regional characteristics specific to the history of divided Germany. Secondly, the patterns of interpreting the extraction and trade of natural gas display various shifts. Nonetheless, the German-Russian energy partnership on the natural gas market was a recurring topic in newspapers (and audio-visual mass media) of the East and the West.

This essay discusses methodological difficulties of the established concept of social memory for the analysis of energo-political discourse. Drawing on System Theory and Actor-Network-Theory, I argue that the concept of memory in terms of a collective narrative has to be abandoned in favour of an understanding that conceives of memory as recursive communicative operations of the media. Furthermore, I attempt to re-embed the materio-realities of natural gas trade into the analysis of the mass media’s discourse. This analytical approach leads to the proposition that the public discourse around the German-Russian Energy partnership is a mediated representation of an assemblage that comprises relevant human and thingly members that in their specific association created an interactive stability among participants of that assemblage rather than a consistent narrative.

## **Radiation and Borders: Chernobyl as a National and Transnational Site of Memory**

**Karena Kalmbach**

The public debate about the consequences of Chernobyl is of particular political relevance because each interpretation of the event also involves a judgment

about the danger of low-level radiation exposure. Thus, statements about Chernobyl and its aftermath are also claims about what it should teach us about the non-military use of nuclear energy. Commemorations of Chernobyl, such as those that occur on its anniversary, are therefore inherently political: the forms of language and the “facts” used to talk about it are an attempt to influence public perceptions about the risks connected with this type of electricity production. Furthermore, the narratives created by various participants in the Chernobyl debate demonstrate how different the perceptions of risk really are.

This essay starts with an overview of the accident and its evaluation. It subsequently examines different forms of remembering Chernobyl, from both a national and transnational perspective. It discusses national and transnational carriers of memories such as literature and photography, and elaborates on the implications of the contesting narratives interpreting Chernobyl in “apocalyptic” versus “radiophobic” ways. Furthermore, the essay sheds light on the implications of Chernobyl as a national site of memory in Germany, France, and Belarus. The comparative perspective reveals the importance of underlying structures such as national (nuclear) politics, elite and expert culture, environmentalism, and the role of individual agency. These factors condition the emergence of a specific narrative of the accident within a specific discursive field, and, furthermore, determine the meaning attributed to “Chernobyl” in a given national context setting. The essay concludes with some reflections on the future of Chernobyl as a site of memory and the reshaping of the Chernobyl discourse through Fukushima.

## **Knechtsand: A Site of Memory in Flux** **Anna-Katharina Wöbse**

On 9 September 1952, what was known as the Knechtsand Treaty came into force. It codified a barter agreement that the German chancellor Konrad Adenauer had negotiated with the Allies. The Knechtsand, a sandbank in the estuary of the Weser, would from now on serve as a bombing range for the British and American air forces stationed in England. Soon, however, objections were made by local fishermen, politicians, and bird-lovers. These objections gained support from European networks of conservationists as the victims of the bombing – molting shelducks – were migrating birds. The subsequent protest served as a practice run for civil society activism in participating in pre-ecological and in particular ethical debate about the protection of animals and nature. In the long run the sandbank would turn into one of the historical heartlands of the national park and today’s World Natural Heritage Wadden Sea. Knechtsand was a multifaceted test site for the exploration of fundamental political, social, and ecological debates. By approaching this location and its feathered inhabitants historically and sketching out a topography of memory, this article uncovers strands of tradition that are hugely significant for our understanding of the Wadden Sea and the expanding conservation regime.