



Press Release

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New Research Department “Knowledge Systems and Collective Life” to Explore Environment, Politics, and Society

This innovative new department at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG) will use historical, ethnographic, multimedia, and community-engaged approaches to deepen our understanding of the historical roots of contemporary crises—environmental, epidemiological, economic, diplomatic, and others—and the forms of knowledge that have been mobilized to address them. The department will be directed by Etienne Benson, an historian of modern environmental science and politics. He was previously an Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

How do politics shape what we know, and how does what we know shape our politics? Does living in a time of multiplying crises change the way scientists conduct their studies and communicate their findings to policymakers and members of the public? What are the historical origins of distrust in science and growing interest in alternative ways of producing and communicating knowledge? This interdisciplinary department seeks to bring global and historical perspectives to these pressing contemporary questions at the intersection of science, politics, and collective life.

“I’m thrilled to have the opportunity to pursue this research agenda at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science,” says Benson. “The institute has been at the cutting edge of the historical study of science and other forms of knowledge-making since its founding in 1994, and it offers a uniquely supportive environment for the kind of collaborative, interdisciplinary research that is required to address questions of this scope and complexity.”

One initial area of focus will be the changing relationships between various forms of environmental knowledge during times of crisis. This work builds on Benson’s book *Surroundings* (2020), which explored the history of the modern concept of the environment from its origins among eighteenth-century French naturalists to its reinvention by scientists, scholars, artists, and activists in the early twenty-first century. As the book shows, various groups of people throughout this history have conceived of the environment in very different, even incompatible ways. These differences have shaped the way they approached urgent environmental challenges. The department will expand this research to include a wide range of perspectives on environmental knowledge in times of crisis, including those from Indigenous communities and the Global South.

The environment is a particularly apt topic for exploring the relationship between science and politics, and between knowledge-making and collective life in the most general sense. Environmental problems tend to be urgent and complex, stakeholders often disagree over the basic terms of debate, and science is frequently in conflict with other forms of knowledge. To understand how knowledge is produced and circulated under these conditions, the department will conduct research on a variety of scales, from the individual laboratory or field site to the planet as a whole. It will also pursue comparative research on other complex and contested domains of knowledge, such as public health and social policy.

This wide-ranging research requires interdisciplinary collaboration and the development of innovative methods. Researchers will focus on a variety of national and transnational contexts and use

approaches from the history of science, intellectual history, anthropology, media studies, and science and technology studies. Multimedia research methods, such as oral history interviews and ethnographic filmmaking, will be used to reveal perspectives, experiences, and voices absent from the textual records typically consulted by historians. The department will integrate these methods into community-based collaborations that give people with first-hand experience of the histories in question opportunities to participate in research as active partners.

In the present moment of sociopolitical turmoil, the need for reliable knowledge to address climate change and other pressing challenges has collided headlong with the proliferation of disagreements over the proper sources and standards of knowledge. This timely research program will fill important gaps in our understanding of the historical background of, and alternatives to, this contemporary dilemma. A department working group on “Environmental Knowledge in Times of Crisis” will be formed in summer 2023, and a launch event is planned for fall 2023. The department looks forward to welcoming doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, and research scholars from spring 2023 onwards as it pursues its ambitious research agenda.

Biography: Etienne Benson

Etienne Benson is an historian of environmental science and politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He holds a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2008). Prior to joining the MPIWG he was an Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania (2013–22). He has also been a Research Scholar in the MPIWG Department “Ideals and Practices of Rationality” (directed by Lorraine Daston) and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Harvard University Center for the Environment.

Selected Publications

- *Wired Wilderness: Technologies of Tracking and the Making of Modern Wildlife* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
- *Surroundings: A History of Environments and Environmentalisms* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- “Random River: Luna Leopold and the Promise of Chance in Fluvial Geomorphology,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 67 (2020): 14–23.
- “A Centrifuge of Calculation: Managing Data and Enthusiasm in Early Twentieth-Century Bird Banding,” *Osiris* 32: *Data Histories*, edited by Elena Aronova, Christine von Oertzen, and David Sepkoski (2017): 286–306.

Links

- Department: <https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/research/departments/dept-ii>
- Biography/profile: <https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/users/ebenson>

About the MPIWG

Founded in 1994, the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG) in Berlin, Germany, is one of the more than 80 research institutes administered by the Max Planck Society. It is dedicated to the study of the history of science and aims to understand scientific thinking and practice as historical phenomena, with projects spanning globally and across eras of human history.

Press Enquiries

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