

Amsterdam German Studies Lecture | Frank Uekötter

Living in a Vortex: On Writing World History at a Time of Globalisation
Blues

Activiteit van Duitsland Instituut Amsterdam

Datum: donderdag 11 mei 2023 om 17:00 uur

Locatie: SPUI25, Spui 25-27, Amsterdam

Informatie: Voertaal: Engels

Toegang: Aanmelden via SPUI25

De glorie dagen van de globalisering zijn voorbij. Na de ontvullerende ervaringen van de afgelopen jaren is er weinig over van het geloof dat groeiende internationale uitwisseling wederzijds begrip en samenwerking bevordert. Tegelijkertijd maakt de milieucrisis het steeds belangrijker om op wereldschaal te denken. In zijn lezing schetst Frank Uekötter het concept van 'leven in een draaikolk': een nieuwe benadering van de wereldgeschiedenis die ons in staat stelt het traject van de mens en zijn omgeving in het tijdperk van de mondiale moderniteit in kaart te brengen.

The glory days of globalization are over. After the sobering experiences of the last few years, little remains of the faith that growing international exchange will foster mutual understanding and cooperation. But at the same time, the environmental crisis makes it ever more important to think on a global scale. Pollution knows no borders, and the same holds true for erosion, loss of biodiversity, climate change and other issues at the interface of man and the natural world. The time has come for a new type of world history that reflects the predicament of our times: We know more than ever about the state of the natural world, we have the concepts and the tools, technological and other, and yet we somehow fail to get our act together.

The presentation offers a new approach to world history that allows us to chart the trajectory of humans and their environments in the age of global modernity: what if we view ourselves as captives of a giant, planet-sized vortex with plenty of turbulence, cross-currents, and efforts to regulate or manipulate the flow of

water? The vortex evokes a sense of being pushed around by faceless material forces, reflecting the insights of earth system science and the case for a new geological epoch, the anthropocene. At the same time, there is plenty of human agency inside a vortex, as humans seek to work with the flow or simply stay above water. But most of all, the concept provides a powerful reminder that we need a new mode of historical narration. Linear narratives with clear starts, endings, and moral bottom lines fare poorly in the rough waters of the vortex.

The presentation is based on Uekötter's monograph *The Vortex: An Environmental History of the Modern World*, recently published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Drawing on examples as diverse as sugar, guano, battery chicken, and DDT, it traces the making of an entangled multidimensional legacy that continues to shape global environmental thinking and action in the new millennium. Living in the vortex is about making choices - and maybe we can make more sustainable choices if we view our current predicament from a new angle.

[Frank Uekötter](#) is Professor of Environmental Humanities at Birmingham University, working on environmental issues, both past and present, in a global context.

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