

FLUID UNCERTAINTY: PROSPECTS OF URBAN WATER

REFLECTIONS ON THE LSE CITIES URBAN UNCERTAINTY WORKSHOP SERIES,
LONDON, 30 APRIL 2013

Panelists: Sarah Bell (UCL), Matthew Gandy (UCL), Michael Guggenheim (Goldsmiths), Andrew Karvonen (University of Manchester), Alex Loftus (King's College London), and Rita Samiolo (LSE)

Chair: Austin Zeiderman, Research Fellow, LSE Cities

Austin Zeiderman introduced the focus of the first workshop on Urban Uncertainty as part of the wider research being undertaken at LSE Cities that seeks to critically explore and interrogate emerging ways of envisioning and governing the future of cities. Framing the workshop, *Fluid Uncertainty: Prospects of Urban Water*, through the importance of water in mediating urban life and infrastructure, Zeiderman contextualised the series through the overarching assumption that uncertainty is a driving force in cities, with cultural, political and spatial implications. He emphasized the open and collaborative nature of the work, the need to approach such issues from multiple perspectives and welcomed the participants and speakers to engage in a wide ranging discussion across the afternoon. After some preliminary discussion that explored emerging understandings of uncertainty generated during the initial phase of the work the attention turned to the invited participants.

The first speaker was Matthew Gandy who presented "Fears, Floods and Fantasies: Inundation of London," drawing on science fiction dystopian and utopian visions of the city that frame our understandings of future flooding scenarios and capture the tensions involved in the planning and management of London's flood risk. These competing visions of the uncertain future, between large-scale techno-managerial infrastructure projects, such as the Thames Barrier, and smaller-scale interventions focused on ecological restoration across the flood plain, provided the context for examining how fluid uncertainty is conceptualised across the various bodies responsible for these issues in the city. Drawing out a number of

historical themes that characterise these processes, Gandy suggested that notions of resilience are increasingly converging with security discourses, the important role of urban intermediaries with technical expertise in developing progressive responses, the need to widen these often technocentric understandings through multiple voices across the city and the need for scholars to think through the agency of nature.

Rita Samiolo spoke next on "Fixing Nature and the Economy: the Controversy Over the Flood Protection Scheme for Venice," which built on Gandy's focus on flooding from a different perspective. Drawing on expert representations of Venice's economy and nature deployed in relation to flood management interventions, and the implications for future (un)governability, the talk provided a historically informed exploration of debates about the lagoon. Samiolo showed how these models have been influenced by specific ways of remembering the city: as both the ancient republic of Venice and its strategies for governing waters, along with traditional notions of the lagoon of Venice. In conclusion, Samiolo pointed to the tensions inherent in notions of equilibrium and resilience, where they can be viewed either as properties of nature to be preserved or as objects of human intervention and politics that can be manufactured from these uncertainties.

In the third presentation of the workshop, Andy Karvonen examined urban uncertainty through the historic case study of Seattle through "Manufacturing Uncertainty: Taming Urban Water Flows in Seattle". Karvonen pointed to the human-environment interactions and infrastructure develop-

ments that sought to tame nature, but ultimately created new uncertainties during the economic expansion of Seattle and new interpretations of uncertain natures which were relied upon to convey the necessity for landscape transformation. Karvonen introduced the notion of the engineer as a modern Prometheus, or one who through technology could tame nature (and uncertainty) for human exploitation. Karvonen noted that a key challenge for the 21st century is in reorienting inherited landscapes, specifically recognizing that uncertainty and risk cannot be engineered out, and instead must co-exist with clever design and acceptance that urban uncertainties are part of the city's socio-natural landscape.

Sarah Bell's presentation on "Renegotiating Water in Cities: Water Sensitive Urban Design" brought together various strands of feminist theory to describe the relationship between people, technology and water in cities. She argued that it is timely to reconsider the relationship between cities and water, and provocatively questioned what cities would look like if limits to human control over water were acknowledged. Bell credited feminist urban scholarship with highlighting the problematic constructions of power dynamics in the city. In particular, feminist scholars parallel the domination of the masculine over the feminine, to urban control and discipline mechanisms in the forms of water infrastructure. Through this framework, masculine constructions of technology and infrastructure are associated with control that seeks to tame uncertainty and the dominance of 'hard' technical solutions over that of 'soft' social processes. Additionally, she challenged looking at water not as a force to be mastered, but as a partner in shaping urban settlements and culture.

Michael Guggenheim introduced work theorizing how disasters are enacted, materialized and represented in test conditions in his presentation; "Form of Exercises: Water as Demonstration and Test". The issue for Guggenheim is one of interest since different to other forms of exercise, the disaster and ensuing events are difficult to recreate, and have implications for how we react to real situations. Using the example of the 2011 "Exercise Watermark", the largest flood exercise held in the UK, Guggenheim illustrated how exercises cre-

ated a relationship between floods, experts, and participants. In this talk, uncertainty prompted certain types of 'pretend' activities so that people could prepare for a disruptive event in which these activities cast people in particular roles, whether passive or active, central or peripheral, professional or non-professional.

In the last presentation of the workshop, Alex Loftus argued for the importance of urban political ecology (UPE) in theorizing fluid uncertainties in his talk, "Rethinking Political Ecologies of Water". Drawing on work from Buenos Aires, which focused on the privatization of water, Loftus used UPE to situate different actors, such as the state, NGOs, union organizations, working in a politicized environment. The framework, also applied to his work in Durban, helped to understand the reworking of relations shaping urban water provision, the rethinking of uncertainty in cities, and the operation of power within an urban context. Loftus outlined theoretical propositions that emerged from his work including: thoughts on a dialectical approach to the city; the possibilities of a radical socio-natural politics; questions of common sense in the city and emergent forms of praxis, all of which provided important understandings of the politics of uncertainty.

The discussion throughout the workshop generated a number of important considerations that were debated and examined by the wider audience and generated some key emerging themes that linked each of the presentations. Pulling together common themes from the papers, Austin Zeiderman commented on a series of ways to approach urban uncertainty that will contribute to the widening debates taking place at LSE Cities and beyond. These included thinking about the temporalities of uncertainty and whether we live in a more uncertain world today, how uncertainties are problematised and the productive nature of uncertainty in reshaping relations or capitalizing new markets and the need to consider who profits from such dynamics. A focus on the political possibilities of uncertainty was another strong theme emerging from each of the presentations with considerations about how the democratic arena is shaped and mediated via uncertainties and the conditions of possibility for equality and

and the conditions of possibility for equality and citizenship rights that may arise out of such dynamics. Clearly the discussions around the contributions different theoretical traditions may contribute to understandings and the implications of these pathways emerged across the very different presentations and prompting much debate about how different models and conceptualisations of uncertainty are produced and mobilized. Perhaps the final area of debate that continued throughout the workshop was focused on thinking about who decides what is certain/uncertain in cities and the spatialities of such power relationships.

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