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Erinnerungsfluten: The Storm Flood of 1962 in Hamburg's Civic Memory

My dissertation project examines the transformation of Hamburg's public memory of the Storm Flood of 1962 and its role in the creation of a specific "culture of disaster" from a cultural and environmental historical perspective.

My goal is to establish a secondary observational plane which focuses not so much on the actual flood, but rather on the resulting commemorative practices and narratives. Furthermore, I will treat the memory of the disaster as a history linking nature and society. I see the flood as a "socio-natural site of memory", whose inception and transformation can be examined through an analysis of the physical and symbolic practices of memory and behavioral patterns of this technologically-advanced risk-society when faced with serious natural disasters.

As a result, a large part of my research concentrates on conceptions of the environment, conventional disaster motifs, and their interpretation. How did the North Sea Flood of 1962 become a permanent part of local and national public memory culture? Which cultural patterns and narratives have helped build collective memory structures, and what actors influenced their establishment as such? Is there evidence of suppressed or negatively-perceived memories?

I will explore to what extent the memory-inspired conceptions of disasters led to a new and increased understanding of occurrences of extreme flood events – and, conversely, how these patterns of interpretation were redimensioned by changing ideas on how to handle "dangerous" nature. My dissertation project does not only examine the history of commemorations of the flood, but also takes a look at the relationship between humans and nature, and its importance in changing historical narratives of the event.