

Since the German biologist Anton Dohrn founded its zoological station in 1872, scientists have been coming to Naples to study the foundations of modern biology. Soon, it became an international center for the life sciences, with a special focus on ecological questions concerning the ‘the habits and conditions of life’, as its founder Anton Dohrn framed the station’s research programme.

At the same time, writers and philosophers rediscovered the Southern Italian metropolis, which had been a major travel destination for previous centuries. In the summer of 1925, the city witnessed a remarkable gathering: Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Alfred Sohn-Rethel came to Naples, and their visits inspired them to reflect on quite similar questions – namely, the specific quality, range, and influence of surroundings, environments, and habitats – albeit from a historical materialist perspective focusing on the human subject and its socio-economic conditions.

Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacin used the term ‘porosity’ to describe Naples. Adopting this term as its key analytical category, the talk aims at relating these Neapolitan knowledge formations – biological and philosophical – in order to address some decisive aspects of modern ecological thinking.

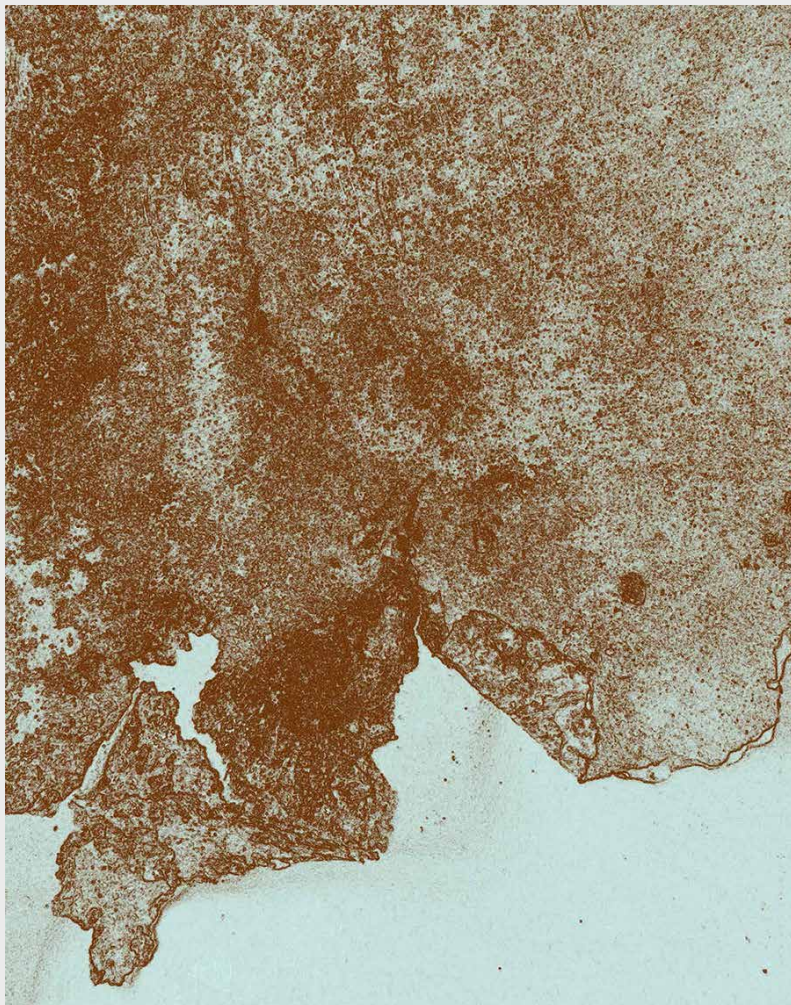
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#### ICI Lecture Series **ERRANS environ/s**

There is hardly a discipline, field, or discourse within the natural and social sciences nor the humanities that hasn’t long been touched and transformed by the notions of milieu, environment, or Umwelt. The recent revival and proliferation of ecological discourses can be understood, at least in part, as a response to the increasingly complete immersion in technologically in-formed environments.

The transdisciplinary impact of these new concepts has not yet been captured, nor is it clear that it can be captured, but while the life sciences play a prominent role in them (having adopted, in the 19th century, concepts from physics and transgressed into the social sciences, for example, as racist discourses and social Darwinism), they don’t operate as the leading science in this transformation. Instead, this process appears to be a multidirectional, non-hierarchizable, and errant movement, itself constituting a complex ecology of knowledge.

**ERRANS environ/s** contemplates aspects of this frequently divergent, potentially errant, and certainly ongoing transformation of not only the sciences or cultures of knowledge, but also cultural and artistic production at large. It will investigate the ways in which an attention to environments can have the effect of dissolving boundaries or making them permeable, questioning clear-cut distinctions, undermining naive ontologies, decentring the subject, folding nature and culture, and producing complex political ecologies attuned to far-reaching entanglements.



# Christina Wessely

## Milieus, Environments, Life Forms

### Biology and Critical Theory in the Gulf of Naples