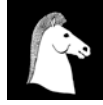




Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation:

Chase, Malcolm. Review of *The Fading of the Greens: The Decline of Environmental Politics in the West*, by Anna Bramwell. *Environment and History* 1, no. 1 (February 1995): 125–26.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/2841>.

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1995. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publishers. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk>.

Book Review

The Fading of the Greens: the Decline of Environmental Politics in the West

Anna Bramwell

Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994

ISBN 0-300-06040-8 £18.95. xi + 224pp.

Anna Bramwell's *Ecology in the 20th Century: a History* (1989) attracted admiring and infuriated readers in about equal measure. It was primarily a history of political ecology – or ecologism to use Bramwell's preferred term – rather than of ecology as a scientific discipline; but it was a substantial work and the only history in English of European Green political movements. Well-documented and written in a lively style, it quickly became a benchmark text, not least among Green political activists who seem to have seen in it a source of witnesses to the cause, as well as further evidence that Green ideas were beginning to be taken seriously outside the movement. Others were more critical. Bramwell had observed that 'the history of ecologism is not only in its infancy, but what exists has largely been written by believers' (1989: 13). She herself was seen as one such believer, both engaged in a polemic against 'left wing entryism' into Green movements and also at pains to stress the authoritarian – even fascist – proclivities of Green pioneers. This 'perverse and dangerous book' (to quote one review, of which Bramwell is clearly proud, quoting it both on the dust jacket and in her text) became something of an albatross to its author. Interviewed in the UK newspaper *The Guardian* (15 October 1994), she ascribed to it her failure to obtain a permanent academic post. *The Fading of the Greens* is unlikely to redress the situation.

Anna Bramwell remains a believer of a kind, but she is at pains to distance herself from any suspicion of being an 'insider' in Green politics. It is pertinent to note here that she is now co-ordinator of the Environmental Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe, at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris. *The Fading of the Greens* does not have the appearance, however, of being a book written by a bureaucrat. Anna Bramwell remains quarrelsome, *The Fading of the Greens* is peppered with aphorisms such as 'scientists find in ecological causes a way to fill the void created by the rigours and boredom of their discipline' (p. 169) and 'if a river has rights, then a lettuce has rights' (p. 183). All good knockabout stuff, but a style that emerges out of a passionate engagement with the problematics of political thought and action concerning the environment. Bramwell's scrutiny of Green politics is unmerciful not because she regards her subject as ridiculous or dangerous, but because she believes that environmental issues are too important to be entrusted to politicians to resolve, and certainly not to idealists whose capacities for sectarianism, self delusion and philosophical muddle-headedness Bramwell charts here. Combine this with the argument that 'what is usable in the Green critique has largely been subsumed by the political system' (p. 206) and one has in essence the thesis of *The Fading of the Greens*. The thesis is rounded-out by an examination of how environmentalist pressure groups have consolidated whilst national Green parties have floundered, and an assertion (no more) about the willingness of the corporate sector to listen to, and reach a consensus with, the pressure groups. Herein lies Bramwell's hope for the 'Green future'. 'Because only the maligned Western world has the money and the will to conserve its environment' (p. 208).

Like *Ecology in the 20th Century*, then, this new book by Bramwell is lively and likely to cause a stir. However it is short (around 60,000 words), leans heavily on secondary authorities and is sparsely referenced where the earlier book was the substantial product of well-documented original research. There are also some surprising omissions: no mention of Murray Bookchin, for example; a chapter on Ecocentrism which is barely more than three pages; and a discussion of deep ecology which is mainly a critique of Arne Naess. For the most part the book is a brisk trot through the main features of Green intellectual landscape. For a reflective account of Green political thought one will continue to turn to Anrew Dobson's book of that name. (Bramwell would seem to think so too, it is her most frequent citation.) In a history of post-war Green politics one would wish for something more than its mere 21 pages (covering Germany, Britain and the USA) on the 1945-7 period, and for more too than the extended obituary notice of which the remainder of the book is mainly constituted. Finally, since so much of her argument rests on the assimilation of Green policies by traditional parties, and on an emerging consensus between environmentalist pressure groups and business corporations, it would have been helpful to explore the evidence for these processes.

MALCOM CHASE
Department of Adult Continuing Education
University of Leeds, UK