

RCC Perspectives

## **Consigning Environmentalism to History?**

Remarks on the Place of the Environmental Movement in Modern History

Frank Uekoetter

**Frank Uekoetter** studied history, political science and social sciences at the universities of Freiburg and Bielefeld, the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. In 2006 he was made Dilthey Fellow at the Deutsches Museum in Munich, a post he continues to hold in conjunction with his position as LMU Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center. His recent book *Die Wahrheit ist auf dem Feld: Eine Wissensgeschichte der deutschen Landwirtschaft* (2010), on the history of German agriculture, is published by Vandebroek & Ruprecht as part of the series “Umwelt und Gesellschaft.” His previous contributions to the RCC Perspectives include *The Magic of One: Reflections on the Pathologies of Monoculture*, and an essay in the collection *The Future of Environmental History*, edited by Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch.

One of the more striking features of environmentalism is its remarkable resilience to obituaries. Authors of obituaries usually fall into two categories, those who feel that environmentalism was futile and thus deserved to die, and those who seek an end because they have a different agenda to push. Both types of obituaries tend to flourish in times of crisis: when the German environmental movement was losing steam towards the end of the 1980s, authors as diverse as Herbert Gruhl and Hoimar von Ditfurth abandoned all hopes for environmental reform, thus providing examples for the first type of obituaries.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus showcased the second type when they proclaimed the imminent “death of environmentalism,” their assumption being that a new post-environmental movement would emerge from the ruins.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, the misrepresentation is obvious: what looked like an ending turned out to be, quite simply, “change.”

It is rewarding to start these reflections with a look at these premature obituaries, as they highlight the peculiar situation that historians of the environmental movement are facing nowadays. It is usually easier to write a history with an ending at hand, or at least a major turning point that closes a chapter of history. However, the environmental movement offers its chroniclers no such certainties: environmental NGOs continue to claim popular support, green parties persist all over the globe, and policymakers routinely seek environmental credentials. Moreover, it is hard to say where environmentalism is currently heading: the recent Copenhagen summit witnessed an unprecedented number of activists pushing the issue of global warming—but it also had the world’s leaders disappointing these aspirations with a weak memorandum. Clearly, any assumption on the current state of environmentalism is built on quicksand, and that makes reflections on its place in modern history tricky.

If this essay nonetheless seeks to start such a discussion, it does so for only one reason: that to postpone the debate indefinitely would seem an even less attractive option.

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- 1 Herbert Gruhl, *Himmelfahrt ins Nichts: Der geplünderte Planet vor dem Ende* (Munich: Langen Müller, 1992); Hoimar von Ditfurth, *So laßt uns denn ein Apfelbäumchen pflanzen: Es ist soweit* (Munich: Knauer, 1988).
- 2 Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, *Break through: Why We Can't Leave Saving the Planet to Environmentalists* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).

Forty years after the first “Earth Day” on 22 April 1970, the environmental movement has long been on the radar of the historical community, and a growing pile of studies is providing scholars with inspiration and irritation in equal measure. We have increasingly become aware of the multitude of initiatives that the term “environmentalism” comprises, and the complexity of individual stories. We have learned the different trajectories of pollution control, nature protection, animal welfare, industrial hazards, and many other issues, and we have seen that these civic activities have not merged easily into one single environmental movement; in fact, to a significant extent, they retain their distinct trajectories to the present day. We have found that environmental movements were simultaneously local, national, and international, making for a puzzling interplay of geographical frames. In fact, we are increasingly seeing the broad outlines of a complex web of transnational interactions that will keep scholars busy for years to come. And yet it seems that, for the burgeoning field of environmental history, this wealth of insights represents a threat as well as an achievement: with the growing specialization of scholarly studies, the field is moving towards a situation where the broad outlines of environmental history are getting buried under the weight of ever more case studies. As Anthony Giddens noted in his recent treatise on the politics of climate change, “strictly speaking, of course, there is no green movement—rather, there is a diverse range of positions, perspectives and recipes for action.”<sup>3</sup> It seems pointless to accumulate studies on specific aspects of environmentalism when we are increasingly uncertain as to what environmentalism actually means. It is high time that we initiate a discussion on the place of environmentalism in modern history, lest the old illusion that a synthesis will miraculously emerge from isolated case studies ruins yet another scholarly field.

### **Beyond Teleology**

The need for discussion is all the more pertinent since the first generation of environmental historians has bestowed on us a rather ambiguous methodological legacy. Traditional narratives of environmentalism foster clichés of a natural progression: from modest beginnings, the environmental movement evolved into a global force that holds the promise of a more sustainable future. Samuel Hays gives a prototypical expression for this notion of a “great awakening” in his *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*,

3 Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change* (Cambridge: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 50.

an approach that appears all the more forceful since Hays earned his reputation as a historian with his staunch critique of the idealistic reading of Progressivism.<sup>4</sup> “Public interest in environmental affairs [...] stems from a desire to improve personal, family, and community life. [...] An interest in the environmental quality of life is to be understood simply as an integral part of the drives inherent in persistent human aspiration and achievement,” Hays declares.<sup>5</sup> Roderick Nash wrote his *The Rights of Nature* in a similar vein: his narrative depicts “environmental ethics as a logical extrapolation of powerful liberal traditions as old as the republic,” even suggesting by way of conclusion that America might be facing another civil war, only this time for the liberation of nature rather than slaves.<sup>6</sup> In these readings, environmentalism is the inevitable conclusion of history, the green happy ending that has the chronicler shifting into a celebratory mode: “if there is anything one can learn from the history of the environmental movement, then it is surely first and foremost that the movement did not emerge out of nowhere: it [...] provided an outlet to a feeling of discomfort that had been building for more than a century.”<sup>7</sup>

It does not call for long explanations to show that teleologies of this kind will have a hard time in the twenty-first century. After eight years during which the George W. Bush administration conducted a vigorous anti-environmental crusade, emphatic stories about an inevitable “rise of the greens” are hard to sustain.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, with the spectacular failure of the Copenhagen summit, the idea of the gradual birth of an international environmental polity, bound to kick in where nation-states fail, looks more naïve than ever. In his *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, Samuel Hays writes a brilliant summary of Ronald Reagan’s anti-environmental backlash, gleefully noting

4 See John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 257.

5 Samuel P. Hays in collaboration with Barbara D. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.

6 Roderick F. Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 200.

7 Joachim Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 272n.

8 See Carl Pope and Paul Rauber, *Strategic Ignorance: Why the Bush Administration is Recklessly Destroying a Century of Environmental Progress* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 2004); Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., *Crimes Against Nature: How George W. Bush and His Corporate Pals are Plundering the Country and Hijacking our Democracy* (New York: Harper, 2004); Robert S. Devine, *Bush Versus The Environment* (New York: Anchor, 2004); David Schoenbord, *Saving Our Environment From Washington: How Congress Grabs Power, Shirks Responsibility, and Shortchanges the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

its demise and the resurgence of environmentalism.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the first decade of the twenty-first century does not offer such a convenient escape. With globalization, the end of the cold war coupled with the growing importance of non-Western powers, and the widening gap between rich and poor, the rise of environmentalism looks ever more like a sideshow.

It would be tempting to discuss this global challenge in an equally global fashion. However, this essay is more modest in that it gives preferential treatment to one country, namely Germany. The reason is pragmatic: this essay is the outgrowth of a monograph on German environmentalism, and essentially serves as an outlet for methodological reflections and headaches that plagued the author during writing.<sup>10</sup> The choice of this country may have its charms for historians of other countries as well, and not only because conceptual problems may be similar. Since the late nineteenth century, German environmentalism has earned a reputation for being one of the stronger strands of its kind, and observers from abroad have at times touted it as a model. Furthermore, the times are probably past in which global and national histories were seen as inevitably competing endeavors, and this essay, as well as the book which spawned it, makes an effort to look at German environmentalism in an international context. The environmental movement has always been a global phenomenon, but some countries look, with the benefit of hindsight, more similar than others, and this insight makes for important differences in the international context. This article departs from the assumption that the German environmental movement was merely the national variant of a general Western brand of environmentalism, which turned into an American and Western European brand after World War II. This Western brand of environmentalism differs from that of Eastern Europe, where conditions behind the Iron Curtain were fundamentally different, and from that of the Global South, where we may currently witness the birth of the next environmentalism.

Arbitrary as it may seem, the choice of Germany is well-timed, as it converges with recent developments in contemporary history. German historians have frequently left the analysis of the last thirty years to students from political science and sociology, with the archival policy of limited access to documents younger than thirty years

<sup>9</sup> Hays, *Beauty*, 491-526.

<sup>10</sup> The monograph cited is Frank Uekötter, *Am Ende der Gewissheiten: Die ökologische Frage im 21. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2011).

providing a convenient excuse. However, scholars have recently grown disaffected with these traditions, culminating in rallying cries to write *Zeitgeschichte als Problemgeschichte der Gegenwart*, that is “contemporary history as the history of today’s problems.”<sup>11</sup> In a recent book-length essay on contemporary history after 1970, Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael emphasized environmental issues, referring to Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” and the theory of the “new social movements.”<sup>12</sup> With that, this seems like a good time to write the history of environmental movements in a broader way, and to explore more fully the context in which modern environmentalism was born. How many environmental historians have given thought to the fact that in the 1970s, German environmentalism flourished “after the boom,” i.e. after a long period of sustained growth and in the wake of deep economic shocks? And how many environmental historians have tied the start of the famous German debate over dying forests to the repercussions of the second oil price shock in 1979? It is time to abandon the “reverse tomato perspective” which has societies turning gradually and inevitably green until they are ripe for picking. The place of environmentalism in modern history is more uncertain than ever. Which makes it all the more important to reflect on how one might consign it—pro tempore—to history.

## Inevitable Definitions

So far this essay has treated “environmentalism” and “environmental movement” as synonymous. Some readers may challenge that choice of words, arguing that the former alludes more to ideas and the latter more to civic organizations, but the conflation of both is by all means intentional. In fact, it seems imperative to move beyond ideas and civic bodies when we talk about environmentalism nowadays, as the limitations of this view are becoming ever more apparent. For instance, we know that many citizens made formal complaints about environmental concerns to the German administration, and that many of these complaints look justified in retrospect. Should we ignore these efforts because these people never moved towards formal organizations?<sup>13</sup>

11 Hans Günter Hockerts, “Zeitgeschichte in Deutschland: Begriff, Methoden, Themenfelder,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 113 (1993): 98-127.

12 Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2008), 32; 67; 95.

13 I have described the scarcity of civic organizations as part of a distinct German style of air pollution regulation. See Frank Uekoetter, *The Age of Smoke: Environmental Policy in Germany and the United States, 1880-1970* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

The Prussian state created a network of conservation advisors (*Naturschutzbeauftragte*), essentially volunteers who became unpaid members of the administration. Are we to exclude them from our view because the concept of civil society wants the common good to emerge from the people, and not from state authorities?<sup>14</sup> And what about the German Public Health Organization (*Deutscher Verein für öffentliche Gesundheitspflege*), a key actor in many debates over public hygiene but essentially an expert league, rather than a civic one?<sup>15</sup> Clearly, if we stick to a narrow conception of civil society, we will grasp only a fraction of the overall topic.

The case for a broad understanding is easier to make than the case for where it should end. American scholars are more sensitized to this problem than German ones, as the breadth of our understanding of environmentalism was the key issue in the debate over Robert Gottlieb's *Forcing the Spring*. In this sweeping narrative on the transformation of the American environmental movement, Gottlieb included not only the familiar suspects, but also figures like Jane Addams, who clearly saw themselves as *social* (as opposed to environmental) activists.<sup>16</sup> Of course, self-identification is not everything when it comes to definitions of this kind, and the environmental justice movement has shown the common ground between social and environmental issues. In fact, it may well be that the merger of social and environmental concerns will be the hallmark of global environmentalism in the twenty-first century, as the rigid distinction between both is looking increasingly like a Western concept, foreign to the burgeoning protest movements in the Global South.<sup>17</sup> It would clearly be unsatisfactory to pursue a narrow nominalist approach, excluding everything from view that does not have conservation written on its label. But having said that, the perils of a distinct retrospective definition are enormous: how can we identify fair and historically correct criteria? With hindsight, Gottlieb's response looks like that of a left-leaning activist: his definition of the environmental movement focused on those people who, in his judgment, were still important for the environmentalists of today.<sup>18</sup>

14 Ute Hasenöhr, *Zivilgesellschaft, Gemeinwohl und Kollektivgüter*, (Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2005), 8.

15 Jürgen Büschenfeld, *Flüsse und Kloaken: Umweltfragen im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung (1870-1918)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1997), 52-64.

16 Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, CA: Island Press, 1993).

17 James David Fahn, *A Land on Fire: The Environmental Consequences of the Southeast Asian Boom* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003).

18 See Robert Gottlieb, *Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Robert Gottlieb, Regina Freer, and Mark Vallianatos *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).



Gottlieb's approach hinges on an American particularity: one can subsume a good part of US environmentalism in a broadly conceived liberal tradition. However, the enduring charm of early environmentalism is rather limited in many other countries, and Germany provides a case in point. No German environmentalist would invoke Günther Schwab or Ernst Rudorff with the same enthusiasm with which American environmentalists speak of Rachel Carson or John Muir. In fact, German environmentalists made a dedicated effort to *distance* themselves from their precursors, arguing that they represented a conservative, authoritarian version of conservation that has little if anything to do with the democratic, left-leaning environmentalism of the late twentieth century. Where American environmentalists were ready to embrace a proud tradition, German environmentalists sought a line of fire positioned somewhere between earlier generations and themselves. In short, an activist approach, which chooses traditions according to present preferences, will not get the chronicler of German environmentalism any closer to a useful definition and we can thus dispense with any further deliberations as to whether such an approach is theoretically and methodologically proper.

Part of the problem is that "environmentalism" is not a term that features strongly in historical documents. The concerns that go under this header today have historically figured as *Naturschutz*, *Heimatschutz*, *Hygiene* (conservation, homeland preservation, hygiene), and so forth. We have yet to find the brave scholar who will provide us with an overview on the historical terminology of the environment, and whether such an overview would help us with the problem at hand is by no means certain. So, for the moment, it seems that the best approach is to work backwards from today's understanding: environmentalism was (and is) about the environment in its broadest sense—about plants and animals, about the air, water, and soil, or more specifically about the ideas, rules, and patterns that define the human interaction with these entities. From such a point of view, any activity that sought to reform existing modes of human interaction with the natural world is part of the history of environmentalism.

In many respects, this definition is even broader than Gottlieb's, and for good reason. It does not tilt towards a liberal tradition, and it includes issues such as consumer protection and organic farming which were adopted by environmentalism long after their inception. Furthermore, it avoids excluding any activity for formal reasons: pamphlets and petitions are no less deserving a venue for environmental protest than big books and civic leagues. It is an actor-centered definition, and thus it stresses that

environmentalism was not an anonymous trend: it always had a face. Most crucially in the German context, this definition does not exclude the state, a key advantage given the strong role of state agencies in the history of German environmentalism. With that, the environmental movement as defined here is not necessarily a phenomenon of civil society; rather, the definition points to the need to describe the extent to which environmentalism is indeed a result of civic activism. So far, studies of environmental movements have usually taken the importance of civic groups to be self-evident, and it is these kinds of truisms that this essay intends to overcome. As Gottlieb did, this essay seeks to open windows, providing a scholarly field with a much-needed dose of fresh air.

Of course, there is a price to be paid for such a broad definition. Historians will need to pay more attention to the dividing lines within environmentalism: what are the dominant trends within the camp? What is separating and uniting them, what is their relative weight, and how do lines of conflict change over time? Scholars will need to exercise caution with terms like “mainstream” and “dominant trend,” as they tend to play down the remarkable plurality of voices and activities. The history of Germany’s Green Party is a good case in point: rivalries between different factions run through its history, and countless commentators have spelt out why this chaotic group was bound for a rapid demise, and yet there is no way of identifying one “true” brand of Green politics, and chastising all others as aberrations. Scholars of environmentalism are really dealing with a plurality of movements, and the key challenge is to turn this multitude of voices into an asset that makes for rich and interesting stories, rather than a cause for confusion.

One tricky issue remains: should one limit the definition of environmentalism to those actors who seek a *positive* contribution to the relationship between man and the natural world? The question is probably more pertinent in the American case, where the environmental opposition was (and is) a significant, well-organized force.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, business-sponsored groups with an anti-environmental agenda did exist in Germany too, and we certainly need to learn more about the *Kommission zur Beseitigung der Auswüchse der Heimatschutzbestrebungen* (Commission against the Excesses in the Preservation of Nature and Culture), and the wonderfully-named initiative *Ma-*

19 Samuel P. Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics Since 1945* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 109-21.

*locher gegen Schmarotzer* (which roughly translates as workers against parasites), which was founded around 1980 when the German chemical giant Bayer grew tired of environmental critiques.<sup>20</sup> However, many German companies sought to co-opt environmentalism rather than fight it tooth and nail, and that makes it tricky to exclude groups that did not make a “positive” contribution. After all, there were many shades of greenwashing, and some of these activities did make a difference, albeit a small one, for man and the natural world. Should we ignore them in a history of environmentalism because they were born of the wrong motives? And if so, how are we then to justify the inclusion of those who sought the protection of nature for chauvinistic, racist, or eugenic reasons?

All in all, there are a number of reasons to opt for a broad definition of environmentalism, as it shifts our analytic focus from modes of exclusion to modes of explanation. Rather than seeking to draw boundaries around our topic, we end up with the question of how to make sense of what went on within the environmental movement: who was defining the agenda, who was marginalized, how did that shape policies, etc. At the same time, a broad definition challenges us to move beyond the traditional focus on ideas, and to think of environmentalism, and in fact any type of environmental concern, as a set of *practices*. From its inception, conservation was about *doing something*: raising awareness, assembling protesters in civic leagues, filing petitions, etc. The truly revolutionary part of the environmental revolution was not the concern per se but what environmentalists did about it: they staged demonstrations, campaigned against polluters, and sought a more ethical lifestyle. Being a member of the environmental movement was not so much a matter of thinking as a way of participating in all, or at least some of these practices. We can no longer naïvely assume that ideas came first and that action then followed from these ideological premises. As environmental pragmatism has taught us, the reverse may be true: to a significant extent, the philosophy of environmentalism was defined on the march.<sup>21</sup>

20 Andreas Knaut, *Zurück zur Natur! Die Wurzeln der Ökologiebewegung* (Bonn: Arbeitsgemeinschaft Beruflicher und Ehrenamtlicher Naturschutz, 1993), 263; <http://www.cbgnetwork.org/1565.html>.

21 I wish to thank Herwig Grimm for drawing my attention to environmental pragmatism and its relevance for my endeavor. See his *Das moralphilosophische Experiment: John Deweys Methode empirischer Untersuchungen als Modell der problem- und anwendungsorientierten Tierethik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

### Three Fields of Environmentalism

A “practical turn” in environmental historiography shifts emphasis in talking about the “environmental movement” from the adjective to the noun. Rather than ponder questions about the meaning of “environmental,” the focus is on who got what moving, and for what reason. This approach makes it imperative to look more closely at the types of actors involved, and understand their distinct logics of action. The old approach, which conflated environmentalism with civic organizations, could dispense with such an effort, since its actors are by definition following certain rationales: civic leagues recruit members, seek funds, define goals, and fight for them. However, state agencies behave differently, as do researchers, professionals, and all the other groups that in one way or another sought to change the relationship between humans and nature, and thus come under the big umbrella of the aforementioned definition. The danger is that the ensuing history of environmentalism thus dissolves into a boundless variety of peculiar stories—a diffuse mass of individuals, groups, and institutions that behaved in an incoherent, chaotic way.

In order to prevent this kind of neo-historicism, where each faction is (in the words of Leopold von Ranke) next to god, this project takes refuge in Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of fields. In a nutshell, the theory of fields asserts that action in a certain arena is bound by a set of formal and informal rules. According to Bourdieu, each individual develops a certain habitus, a mindset influenced and shaped through everyday interactions with other people. Through the habitus, rules are incorporated on a conscious or semi-conscious level, and these rules guide the individual’s behavior within a certain field: they mandate a certain style of thinking and action, they suggest certain time frames and cycles, and they imply a hierarchy of actors. In the present context, the great advantage of this concept is that actors within a field need not be homogeneous. In fact, they rarely are, as fields usually comprise state agencies, civic bodies, and individuals. The emphasis lies on the rules of exchange, and on the resources and power relations that they imply.<sup>22</sup>

Armed with this concept, we can identify three distinct fields of human action within the broad arena of environmentalism: the environment as a field for civic activities, the

22 See Markus Schwingel, *Pierre Bourdieu zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1995), 59-81.

environment as a field of policy, and the environment as a cultural realm in the broadest sense (*Lebenswelt*). To be sure, none of these fields can—or should—be studied in isolation; quite the contrary, issues and conflicts often include civic activism, state policies, and cultural repercussions. However, the three fields have their own distinct logics of action: different roles, different time frames, different codes of conduct. The issue of time frames may serve to highlight the point: whereas the civic field tilts towards campaigns and activism, the political field prefers a fixed set of laws and rules that state agencies can enforce properly. The cultural field lies somewhere in between, as culture implies both short-term fashions and long-standing patterns of behavior.

To be sure, Bourdieu's theory of fields does not come without built-in problems. A tricky issue is that according to Bourdieu, there is no logic in the issues themselves. This is in turn part of a larger problem, ultimately looping back to the Durkheimian dogma of always studying social facts in relation to other social facts—a stance that environmental scholars often take pain to debunk. A history of environmentalism clearly needs to take into account the huge number of dangerous accidents in the development of nuclear power, and the fact that one can indeed solve the acid rain problems through filters once and for all (unlike, say, global warming). In short, nature matters, and acts in the most erratic way for sociologists, and it is high time that we move beyond their naiveté.

Each of the three fields follows a distinct, autonomous code of behavior, and it is by no means certain that developments in these fields mutually reinforce each other. Developments can diverge to a great extent, and often have: the boom of conservation in Nazi Germany was a boom of the political field, where the feverish activities of administrators and politicians contrasted with stagnation in civil society and everyday culture.<sup>23</sup> In fact, one can write a history of German environmentalism as a history of the interplay between these different modes: at times, civic, political, and cultural modes were in sync; in other times, they were out of step, or even pitted against one another. Characteristically, the boom times of environmentalism were those where political, civic, and cultural fields flourished, interacted, and reinforced each other. The following two chapters will look into the two crucial boom periods of environmentalism: the decades before World War I and the years around 1970.

23 Frank Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown: A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

## Roots? The Problem of 1900

Once upon a time, environmental historians could gain acclaim for showing that environmentalism was older than people thought. Proving that environmentalism's roots ran deep was a running theme in the first generation of environmental history research, inspiring landmark books such as Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* and Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*.<sup>24</sup> With hindsight, it is rather discomfiting to see environmental history emerging with broad syntheses rather than the usual case studies, but that was by no means an American peculiarity. When German environmental history began in the 1980s, two early books were Rolf Peter Sieferle's *Fortschrittsfeinde?* and Ulrich Linse's *Ökopax und Anarchie*.<sup>25</sup>

It goes without saying that the search for “the roots of environmentalism” was productive, and perhaps instrumental, for the rise of the new scholarly community. But nonetheless, it is probably appropriate here to note that “roots” is, and has always been, a rather dubious metaphor. If anything, “roots” are a teleological concept par excellence, and one that naturalizes processes in a problematic way: there is no such thing in social movements as natural growth. Finally, “roots” suggest an autonomous development that ignores crucial questions of context. To be sure, the idea of “roots” makes it easier to construct narratives, not least because it implies a clear and unambiguous starting point. Once we have identified the roots of environmentalism, there is no need to go back farther into the past. However, the present definition does not offer such a convenient way out: if we see reflections on the relationship between man and the natural world as a human constant, where each generation renegotiates its understanding of environmentalism, there is no “zero hour” when scholars can tune in. Instead, we see layer upon layer of environmental policies and practices, each strongly dependent on the contemporary context. So how do we decide when to stop drilling?

A satisfactory response will need to consist of two parts: a specific point in time—a date, a year, or a decade—and a conceptual clarification as to what the turning point really means. As to the latter, I have found it helpful to resort to Reinhart Koselleck's

24 Roderick F. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

25 Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Fortschrittsfeinde? Opposition gegen Technik und Industrie von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 1984); Ulrich Linse, *Ökopax und Anarchie: Eine Geschichte der ökologischen Bewegungen in Deutschland* (Munich: DTV, 1986).

concept of a *Sattelzeit*, or saddle period. Koselleck used the term to highlight the crucial role of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century for the political vocabulary of the modern era: the years around 1800 thus act like a watershed, designating distinct realms of communication and understanding and acting in the same way as the saddle of a mountain, which hides the landscapes on the other side from view.<sup>26</sup> Following his example, I argue that we can understand the years around 1900 as a similar saddle period: in Wilhelmine Germany, we see the emergence of new organizations, new laws and institutions, and new mindsets that influenced environmental thinking for decades to come.

The big advantage of such an approach is that it allows us to define a start for the narrative that does not play down what came before. We do not need to discount the importance of Romanticism, nor ignore the beautification societies that have received far less attention than they deserve among historians. What we do need to stress, however, is that these traditions were of limited importance after 1900, as changes during these years transformed existing traditions. New civic leagues came into being, words like *Heimat* (homeland) and *Naturdenkmal* (natural monument), certainly not unknown in the nineteenth century, now became glaring concepts that inspired all fields of environmentalism: civic groups, political life, and culture.

The importance of the early 1900s is no peculiarity of German environmentalism. All over the West, we see these years as an important saddle period—in fact, it seems that a new consensus was emerging at that time: membership of Western civilization hinged on some kind of effort to protect nature. Even Japan developed a new tradition of nature protection during those years, strongly drawing on the German example. Transnational communication certainly fostered this trend, as the global career of national parks serves to attest, and yet there was more to this remarkable parallelism of international conservation efforts. Different as they were in motives and goals, it is noteworthy that Western conservation efforts were all focusing on protecting *space*, usually by administrative decree. Unlike previous efforts at nature protection, the new approach was about the land register. As a result, conflicts over access to and ownership of land became fixtures all over the world, and came to define the face of conservation to a significant extent.

26 See Reinhart Koselleck, "Einleitung," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* vol. 1, eds. Reinhard Koselleck, Otto Brunner, and Werner Conze (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972), XIII-XXVII; XV.

But why did different movements all over the world come to favor a concept of nature protection that hinged on controlling space? Two trends may have played an important role. The first was the unprecedented destructive potential of modern industrial capitalism, posing a hitherto unimagined threat to the entire countryside. The second trend is less obvious, but no less crucial: in the late nineteenth century, the regulatory abilities of state governments increased markedly. Through new means of communication and transportation, they were able to control all parts of their territories to an equal extent. From such a point of view, the rise of space-based conservation was a by-product of what Charles Maier has called the “age of territoriality.”<sup>27</sup> In this age, nation-states could enforce rules for space in peripheral regions, something that would have remained an empty gesture in earlier times. In fact, the incomplete reach of the nation-state was still a factor when the United States created Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Alfred Runte has speculated that Congress might have voted for “a fragmented series of parcels,” as opposed to one large protected area, if it had known more about the place.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, government control was nowhere near complete during the age of territoriality, as endless conflicts over enforcement serve to attest. In principle, the German governments of the early 1900s made clear that they felt obliged to fight all “excessive” pollution—but they never came up with a clear definition of what that meant, let alone a desire to talk these things through with the general public. And yet the principle was noteworthy in its own right, as the nineteenth century had not known a state obligation to manage the relationship between man and the natural world to any comparable extent. Thus, environmentalism and the state were tied to each other from the beginning, and that relationship was more than a one-way street. Not only were environmentalists looking for the state to support their agenda, the state was also seeking something in return: funds, power, legitimacy. The reciprocal character of this relationship would be even more important in the second key turning point for modern environmentalism.

27 Charles S. Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 807-31.

28 Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 47.



## The Problem of 1970: The Trouble with Defining the Age of Ecology

It is revealing to compare the saddle period around 1900 with the changes in the post-war years that transformed the conservation tradition into the vibrant environmental movement we know today. For all its importance, the boom period of the early 1900s was a fragmented one: activities went on under divergent headers—nuisance, hygiene, natural monument, etc.—, and did not really build upon one another. In contrast, the years after World War II saw what one might call a networked boom: a series of steps closely related to each other, which combined to make a watershed almost on a par with that of 1900. The degree of continuity was probably too great to speak of another saddle period: administrative structures, the strong role of the state, and the importance of scientific expertise remained fixtures of German environmentalism from the early 1900s until today. And yet, just as in 1900, environmentalists were having a hard time understanding their predecessors, as they now broke with their past in couching their demands in the language of ecology.

It is easy to describe the transition in broad, general terms. Put simply, there were new types and new degrees of activism, allowing for easy “before and after” clichés. Before about 1970, stability had been a hallmark of the German conservation community. The network of institutions in 1914 bore a striking similarity to that of two generations later, as did the basic concepts and tools. The personnel in civic leagues and the conservation administration remained constant for decades, with many conservationists serving under two or even three different regimes; petitions and behind the scenes work were as popular in 1910 as they were in 1960. By contrast, the community became much more fluid in the 1970s and 1980s: the cycles of civic activism and media cycles grew in importance, while the “old boys’ networks” lost a lot of their significance, and not only due to the growing prominence of women in environmental circles. What evolved was a campaign style of environmental policy, with interest growing and shrinking according to highly unstable priorities among members of the political left and the media, making for constant shifts between issues, environmental and otherwise. But if one zooms in, the general picture quickly turns blurry. It suggests a momentous change of tide, devoid of the actors and analytic concepts that one is tempted to seek.

In order to overcome this unsatisfactory picture, the crucial first step is to exorcise what one might call the ghost of 1970. Narratives often gravitate towards that year

when it comes to define the turning point from traditional to environmental protest.<sup>29</sup> In the United States, the rationale includes key legislation such as the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Air Act, the creation of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, and the first Earth Day celebration on 22 April 1970. Great Britain created a Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and a Department of Environment during the same year, and France appointed Europe's first environmental minister in 1971. In 1972, the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* became an international bestseller, and representatives from more than one hundred countries met in Stockholm for the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.<sup>30</sup>

West Germany was clearly part of the trend, acquiring its government action program for the environment (*Umweltprogramm der Bundesregierung*) in 1971 (after an "emergency program" the previous year). And yet the German case may act as a good antidote to the prominence of the years around 1970, as these environmental programs were only one of several steps that defined environmentalism in the Federal Republic. In describing those steps, it is helpful to once more resort to Bourdieu's notion of fields, as civic activities and state policies interacted in an interesting manner. The political and the civic field did maintain their autonomy, but they reacted to and mutually reinforced each other. The following list may serve as a quick wrap-up:<sup>31</sup>

- As the German "economic miracle" made life more comfortable, people became disaffected with the state of the environment. Anger focused particularly on problems that were readily perceived by the senses: dirt, smoke, foam on rivers.
- Some state governments reacted to this anger with new policies, thus creating administrative frameworks which in some cases survive to the present day.
- Social mobilization around 1968 paid scant attention to environmental concerns, though a post-1968 left later emerged to be the custodian of environmental issues.
- Led by Minister of the Interior Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the federal government pursued a highly visible environmental program, facilitating the spread of the word "environment" (*Umwelt*) amongst the general public. Numerous laws and decrees were revised, with special attention paid to pollution problems.
- Protest against nuclear power grew into a mass movement in the 1970s.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Joachim Radkau, *Die Ära der Ökologie: Eine Weltgeschichte* (Munich: Beck, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> It is revealing as to the national focus of studies of environmental movements that we do not yet have a good history of the Stockholm summit.

<sup>31</sup> These steps are discussed in great detail in Uekötter, *Ende der Gewissheiten*.

- Environmental policy turned into a political backwater after Genscher became secretary of state. Helmut Schmidt, chancellor from 1974 to 1982, made no bones of his disinterest in ecology.
- A widespread fear of forest decay (*Waldsterben* in German) opened the door for many related issues, making the early 1980s a boom time of West German environmentalism. A boom in the cultural sphere followed suit—from a growing interest in organic food to recycled paper.
- Governments tried to follow up, implementing new initiatives and creating new agencies, such as the German Ministry for the Environment in 1986. The institutional framework of today's environmental debate stems to a great extent from the period between the late 1970s and the early 1990s.

Thus, as a result of a tremendous sea change lasting from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s, we finally see the West German environmental movement take shape. From this perspective, the environmental revolution really looks more like the result of a series of waves, each building on previous accomplishments and pushing things in different directions. However, after tumultuous change lasting until the mid-1980s, things calmed down notably, and the basic pillars of German environmentalism have proved remarkably stable since then. Organizations and institutions have no longer changed character or focus, and so German environmentalism still feeds on themes, ideas, and modes of behavior from the 1980s, far more so than other political fields. Faced with reunification, globalization, the growing importance of the European Union, and other trends, German environmentalism has shown itself to be quite resilient to change.

### **The National and the Global: Charting a German Sonderweg**

Few issues give the student of environmentalism bigger headaches than geographic scope. It is quite plain that environmental protest was frequently rooted in local concerns. At the same time, environmentalists were always eager to stress that local grievances should have a more general context, to the point where scholars have imposed a dividing line between shallow NIMBY protest (Not In My BackYard) and the real thing.<sup>32</sup> Environmentalism is more than local politics, but beyond that everything

<sup>32</sup> See Raymond Dominick, *The Environmental Movement in Germany: Prophets and Pioneers, 1871-1971* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 42.

is open to question. Certainly no environmental historian would nowadays take the pivotal role of the nation-state for granted.

At a time when global history is all the rage, it is tempting to go for the biggest context possible—all the more since the image of planet Earth hovering in space has been an icon of environmentalism since the late 1960s. However, the history of global environmentalism eludes the chronicler through its highly unstable nature. In the twentieth century alone, environmentalism experienced at least three waves of globalization, each followed by a countervailing trend of deglobalization: the transnational networking of conservation work in the years before World War I; the Western-led boom of environmentalism around 1970; and the upswing of environmental issues all over the globe at the end of the Cold War which culminated in the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

At risk of stating the obvious, these fluctuations should not discourage a view of the broader contexts. In light of recent debates among historians, it probably goes without saying that any history of a nation's environmentalism should nowadays look carefully at transnational and supranational contexts. However, the more traditional discipline of comparative history is no less deserving of attention, and a book on German environmentalism will clearly need to reflect on how events and trends in Germany differed from those in other countries. My monograph identifies five peculiarities of German environmentalism:

- an extraordinary diversity of issues, motives, and geographic scopes;
- a strong, proactive administration;
- weak civic activism on pollution issues;
- the notable prominence of scientific expertise;
- an enormous cultural vibrancy of ideas about nature.

All these peculiarities were visible already during the early 1900s, and they remained surprisingly constant throughout the century, keeping some degree of relevance even today (with one notable exception: pollution changed from a civic backwater in the 1950s to a key issue today).<sup>33</sup> Instead of going into detail at this point, I will highlight one more feature that was a theoretical possibility in the early twentieth century but developed only slowly over time: the considerable involvement of the German en-

<sup>33</sup> These peculiarities are discussed more extensively in Uekötter, *Ende der Gewissheiten*

gineering community. As many environmental problems require technological fixes, innovations from engineers are an obvious aspect of the overall picture. Since engineering emerged as one of the pillars of Germany's economic might in the late nineteenth century, this was a potential boon to German policies and efforts. And yet the involvement of engineers was timid, and remained so for several decades.

I identified the key problem more than a decade ago: the administrative universe was anathema to the world of the engineers, an opposition rooted both in modes of thinking and competition over jobs (engineers had no access to high-level administrative posts, which were usually reserved for specialists in law).<sup>34</sup> When engineers formed an expert committee for dust control technology in the late 1920s, they were emphatic about not endorsing any kind of legislation or administrative activity.<sup>35</sup> The conversion of the engineers into an active regulatory agent occurred in several stages, and they remain severely understudied by environmental historians. Looking into the mutual rapprochement of engineering and environmentalism in Germany is all the more important since the alliance has left a deep impression on the environmental discourse. When Germans stress that "environmentalism creates jobs," the idea of creating export opportunities for German engineering marvels is usually not far away.

The one thing that comparative histories should not do is assert the general superiority of one country over another. Given the pride Germans take in their environmental credentials, it would be tempting to counter Michael Bess's description of "light-green" France with a deeper shade of green for Germany; but that would not only be empirically dubious, for such a narrative would certainly remain silent on factors such as Germany's non-existent speed limit, it would most critically fall back on a naive methodological approach.<sup>36</sup> National styles of environmentalism are not about relative quality but about the opportunities and pitfalls that they imply for the dealings within a society. As I have noted elsewhere, "the issue is not whether one country enjoyed superior conditions, but rather what each country made of them."<sup>37</sup>

34 See Frank Uekötter, "Die Kommunikation zwischen technischen und juristischen Experten als Schlüsselproblem der Umweltgeschichte: Die preußische Regierung und die Berliner Rauchplage," *Technikgeschichte* 66 (1999), 1-31.

35 Frank Uekötter, *Von der Rauchplage zur ökologischen Revolution: Eine Geschichte der Luftverschmutzung in Deutschland und den USA 1880-1970* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2003), 209.

36 Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

37 Uekoetter, *Age of Smoke*, 16.

As an added attraction, comparative perspectives can also be a source of methodological inspiration. It is disheartening to see that few environmental historians have even taken note of the fact that German environmentalism is a blank spot on the global map of environmental justice. (It is little consolation that the situation does not look much better in the rest of Europe.) Scholars have shown for many other countries that traditions of environmentalism were in no way confined to certain social and/or ethnic elites, as earlier publications have suggested.<sup>38</sup> It only takes a look at Günter Wallraff's 1980s classic *Ganz unten* to recognize the close links between ethnic and environmental discrimination, and yet scholars continue to suggest that the natural base of environmentalism was the middle- and upper-classes. I regretfully include my own book in this critique, which is short on ethnic and social issues. An abysmal lack of scholarly attention makes it hard to say something definitive here—except that it is high time indeed for researchers to take a look.

### Causes: The Quest for Security

So far this essay has emphasized ways of describing the transformation of environmentalism, rather than ways of explaining it. This is quite characteristic for recent scholarly efforts, where the underlying causes are typically glossed over in favor of less risky approaches. Jens Ivo Engels explicitly refrained from any attempt to explain the rise of environmentalism, instead devoting his intellectual energies to a discussion as to “how the problem of the threat to nature was processed within the political realm of the Federal Republic.”<sup>39</sup> Part of the reason may be a feeling of remorse, as earlier generations of scholars were all too ready to embrace certain theories, drawing for instance on Ronald Inglehart's argument that environmentalism grew out of the increasing importance of post-material values.<sup>40</sup> To be sure, Inglehart's broad thesis continues to hold some relevance, but only as part of a more complex and diverse set of approaches.

38 See Sylvia Hood Washington, Paul C. Rosier, and Heather Goodall, eds., *Echoes from the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006). For the kind of pioneering essay that we would need for Europe, see Martin V. Melosi, “Environmental Justice, Political Agenda Setting, and the Myths of History,” Melosi (ed.), *Effluent America: Cities, Industry, Energy and the Environment* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 238-62.

39 Jens Ivo Engels, *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik: Ideenwelt und politische Verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950-1980* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), 20.

40 Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005).

It is easier to note the need for causal explanations than to deliver them, as a comprehensive answer would certainly call for a different book than the one I have written. It is quite clear that we cannot explain the rise of environmentalism through a single cause, and a satisfactory discussion would thus have to pursue different paths, and weigh them as to their relative merits in both the national and the international context. However, what I plan to do here is outline a new approach as a supplement to existing explanations. It is tailor-made for the German case, though it may have some relevance for other countries as well. In fact, the explanation is so German that it is difficult to translate properly into English: the proposal is that one of the driving forces of environmentalism was the quest for *Sicherheit*, a word that blends the English words security, safety, and certainty.

For many scholars, such an approach will look counterintuitive. Traditionally, analysts have described environmental concerns as causes of *insecurity*. For example, such a reading underlies Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society: in Beck's interpretation, ecological hazards produced a situation where risk avoidance was no longer an option, and where the demand for security was as strong as it was elusive.<sup>41</sup> In similar fashion, Eckhard Conze, who coined the phrase *Die Suche nach Sicherheit* (the quest for security) in German contemporary history, cast environmentalism as another source of uncertainty in his history of the Federal Republic.<sup>42</sup> There can be little doubt that environmental problems were a cause of genuine fear in the German population, perhaps most strongly during the weeks after the Chernobyl disaster. And yet environmental problems were also offering paths towards security in some respects. By way of evidence, I offer three perspectives:

- Present readings do not account for the fact that environmentalism became a distinctly leftist issue during the 1970s and '80s. However, it was by no means clear that environmentalism would end up aligned with the political left, all the more since existing traditions in Germany were clearly tilted towards the political right. The left came to the issue through the anti-nuclear protest, where marxists suddenly discovered how well the issue fit their ideological predispositions: the merger of state and industrial interests in the development of nuclear power looked exactly

41 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

42 Eckart Conze, *Die Suche nach Sicherheit: Eine Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von 1949 bis in die Gegenwart* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2009), 670.

like the “state monopoly capitalism” as described by Rudolf Hilferding. The strong emphasis on pollution within the German environmental discourse nourished the left’s anti-business instincts, and yet the merger of leftist politics and environmental policy clearly had a good dose of opportunism: the exploitation of nature was still somewhat different from the exploitation of the workers (even if the Marxists of the late 1970s were rather flexible in that respect). In fact, the left came towards environmentalism only after numerous defeats, from futile peace protests to the terror of the Red Army Faction. However, once they had turned to environmental issues, the left experienced several spectacular successes and an unprecedented degree of popularity, something that every political movement seeks, and certainly one that always dreamed of the rise of the masses. Thus, to phrase it in economic terms, environmentalism was a secure investment for the energies of the political left. For a movement coming out of the disappointments of the 1970s, to go environmental was to play safe.

- The state pursued a similar interest when it embraced environmental values. The upsurge of environmentalism occurred while Maier’s “age of territoriality” was peetering out, and this was probably more than a chronological coincidence.<sup>43</sup> As the regulatory power of nation-states was being eroded, administrations had a strong interest in issues that allowed an expansion of budgets and powers, as these issues provided an insecure state with a much-needed dose of legitimacy and certainty as to its enduring importance. Historians usually cast the state as a passive agent, acting only when under pressure from an enraged citizenry, but that reading underestimates the multitude of interests on the side of government. German environmentalism was not only the result of civic protests but also of political entrepreneurs who seized the opportunity, and environmental historians would be well advised to consider these people more closely. Characteristically, Hans-Dietrich Genscher’s environmental offensive drew on the work of dynamic officials such as Peter Menke-Glückert and Günter Hartkopf.<sup>44</sup>
- The “quest for security” took place not only within leftist groups and administrative bodies but also in the public at large. It has gone largely unnoticed that the

<sup>43</sup> Maier, *Consigning*.

<sup>44</sup> Kai F. Hünemörder, *Die Frühgeschichte der globalen Umweltkrise und die Formierung der deutschen Umweltpolitik (1950-1973)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004).



breakthrough of environmentalism in Germany occurred in the wake of the second oil price shock. Martin Geyer recently pointed out that this event has received far less attention than the first oil price shock of 1973/74, in spite of the fact that the ensuing depression was far more consequential.<sup>45</sup> In the aftermath of the second oil price shock, the United States, Great Britain, and France all experienced major realignments of the political scene with the elections, respectively, of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and François Mitterand. Due to its large industrial base, Western Germany was especially vulnerable to the depression, and particularly clueless as to its response. In this context, it was probably a consolation to see an even deeper ecological crisis below the economic mess, or at least a bit of deflection. As a reaction to the crisis of the early 1980s, environmentalism was to West Germany what neoliberalism was to Great Britain and the USA, and state socialism to France.

Once more, this explanation is only one of several, as environmentalism clearly demands what Pierre Bourdieu has called “independent causal series.”<sup>46</sup> However, looking at environmentalism as a *source* of security allows us to better understand the remarkable resilience of German environmentalism since the 1980s. As previously mentioned, Germany’s environmental discourse still focuses on the same issues and concepts, whereas the political landscape has changed tremendously in the last quarter-century.<sup>47</sup> It adds to an understanding of this resilience if one sees environmentalism as a source of security on multiple levels, as changing environmentalism would have implied a shattering of the certainties that activists, administrators and the general public held dear.

However, this interpretation does admittedly have an Achilles’ heel, and that is in the anthropology of security: it tends to presume a natural human urge to gain certainty, and that is clearly a debatable assumption. These doubts are particularly noteworthy when it comes to civic groups: it is quite plausible that a nation-state in crisis seeks to secure its position, but a civic movement is usually more in flux than in search of stability. And yet we can identify stability even within the dynamic of civic activism if we focus on the general pattern of behavior. For all the hustle and bustle of politics, there is a remarkable resilience in action modes since the 1980s.

45 Martin H. Geyer, “Auf der Suche nach der Gegenwart: Neue Arbeiten zur Geschichte der 1970er und 1980er Jahre,” *Archiv für Zeitgeschichte* 50 (2010), 647.

46 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 174.

47 This resilience is discussed extensively in chapter two of my book.

## The Political Style of Ecology

It has become difficult to identify clear indicators for the difference between environmentalism as it developed after World War II and its predecessors. Many issues were not new, and neither were many civic organizations, nor the involvement of state agencies. However, scholars have one trump card, and that is the political style of ecology: environmentalism embraced a new pattern of activism that one might call a “campaign style.” This does not presuppose military headquarters and strategic planning, although groups like Greenpeace did indeed plan their publicity stunts in a highly professional way. The environmental campaigns were distinct from previous activities of conservationists in their strict orientation towards a broad public. The goal was to provoke the general population through demonstrations, media work, and other means, thus depicting environmental causes as the embodiment of the common good, which every sane and informed person would enthusiastically support. The plot was “truth against power” and “the people versus the corporate interests,” as environmentalists sought to mobilize all the moral vigor that a citizens’ crusade could muster. With polarization and a clear enemy, the political style of ecology was indeed reminiscent of a military campaign.<sup>48</sup>

The campaign style was neither an invention nor a privilege of environmentalism. In fact, it is difficult to understand the political style of ecology without the events of 1968 and their aftermath.<sup>49</sup> The student rebellion, now recognized in its German incarnation as merely the most extreme expression of a comprehensive trend towards democratization, made the campaign mode a fixture of the left. Environmentalism was only one of several political fields with the same kind of rules, and that was a boon to both environmentalists and leftists, as protesters used the different arenas quite skillfully to advance their causes. When anti-nuclear protests were stalled in the late 1970s, protesters shifted to peace issues in a vain effort to stop NATO’s rearmament policy under the Double-Track Decision of 1979, only to shift back to environmental concerns once that issue was exhausted. Like a system of communicating vessels, the protest movement shifted its energies to where the campaign style offered the best prospects.

48 See Engels, *Naturpolitik*; Ute Hasenöhr, *Zivilgesellschaft*.

49 Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, *Die 68er Bewegung: Deutschland—Westeuropa—USA* (Munich: Beck, 2005); Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey (ed.), *1968: Vom Ereignis zum Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008).

The campaign style of environmental politics continued to reign supreme after the 1980s, as the mobilization against the deep-water disposal of the Brent Spar in 1995 serves to attest. However, the campaign's success came to look dubious, as the gains were meager as compared to the public frenzy.<sup>50</sup> Two trends were undermining the potential of the campaign style of environmental politics. For one, environmental problems were increasingly transnational and global in character, and thus at odds with the persistence of national styles and structures within the environmental camp. Characteristically, the Green Group of Eight, which represents environmental issues with the European Commission in Brussels, does not even have an internet presence. The second trend was even trickier: the campaign mode relied on the existence of scandals to provide fodder for outrage, and as companies and states became more mindful of environmental concerns, it became increasingly difficult to find suitable issues.

Nonetheless, the campaign style persists in the environmentalist mind, and that contributed to the biggest defeat of the environmental movement in recent years: the failure of the Copenhagen climate summit. Tens of thousands of environmentalists made their voices heard, but to no avail: the protests rang hollow, and sounded oblivious to the complexity of the negotiations. This is not to say that the protests were indeed a prime cause for the fiasco but merely that they were not much help either. The point is that the protests failed to gain a foothold, thus leading to a striking mismatch between political and civic actors: while the former were wrestling with the details of a possible agreement, the latter were chanting "seal the deal", as if the desired agreement was only a question of political will. The two fields, in sync in the 1980s, were now out of touch, and the polarization of the campaign mode was easily defeated by the complexity and impenetrability of the political system.

The failure of the Copenhagen protests was thus more than a routine accident of environmentalism. It was a sign that the campaign mode is no longer the all-purpose weapon that it was in the 1980s. If we take a cue from the pundits, we can now say that we are living in a knowledge society, where information is the key resource.<sup>51</sup> Of course, the campaigns of the 1980s were also about information, but only in the "truth versus power" version. The critique of "greenwashing" thus looks like a vain effort to

50 See Anna-Katharina Wöbse, "Die Brent Spar-Kampagne: Plattform für diverse Wahrheiten," in Frank Uekötter, Jens Hohensee (eds.), *Wird Cassandra heiser? Die Geschichte falscher Ökoalarme* (Stuttgart, 2004), 139-60.

51 See Nico Stehr, *Knowledge Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994).

maintain a convenient polarization, where it is clear who is wearing the white hat and who the black.<sup>52</sup> However, an expert on toxic waste remarked a few years ago that the expert landscape had developed into “a sea of gray hats,” and that is certainly true for other environmental topics as well.<sup>53</sup> The political style of ecology is increasingly turning into a solution in search of a problem. But then, this is where historians shall surrender their authority; they need to morph into another incarnation, that of the politically interested citizen, to take it from here.

### **Living with the Past, or: Can Environmentalism Become Reflexive?**

When the offshore drilling rig Deepwater Horizon exploded in April 2010, causing widespread pollution in the Gulf of Mexico, rescue crews sprayed Corexit, a toxic chemical, to disperse the oil. As a result, the oil became less visible on the surface, frustrating television crews in their quest for the routine oil disaster pictures, but the strategy obviously ran the risk of causing other, less evident damage.<sup>54</sup> In a way, the submerged oil was the perfect metaphor for the way in which the German environmental movement is dealing with its past. Environmentalists know that they have a history, but it is a hidden history, which the movement has been eager to ignore as much as possible. Unlike the feminist movement, German environmentalism never became a powerful advocate of historical scholarship. The net result is that history is now something below the waves, hidden from sight, and yet activists feel its power time and again. The past of environmentalism is an unrecognized past, disturbing, unnerving, and yet impossible to exorcise.

From the historian’s point of view, this situation has two important implications. First, it means that there is a great potential interest in historical scholarship that describes the past in clear and unambiguous terms. Times of crises usually nourish an interest in history, and the present crisis of environmentalism, silent as it may be, is no exception. The second implication is that getting involved will inevitably be more than an

52 Kenny Bruno and Joshua Karliner, *Earthsummit.biz: The Corporate Takeover of Sustainable Development* (Oakland: Food First Books, 2002); Carl Deal, *The Greenpeace Guide to Anti-Environmental Organizations* (Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1993).

53 R. Allan Freeze, *The Environmental Pendulum: A Quest for the Truth about Toxic Chemicals, Human Health, and Environmental Protection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 20.

54 Suzanne Goldenberg, “Gulf Oil Spill Chemical Dispersant Too Toxic, Say EPA,” *The Guardian*, 20 May 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/may/20/gulf-oil-spill-chemical-dispersant>.

academic enterprise. Environmentalism is alive and kicking, and there is no way to write its history without saying something about where it stands, and where it is heading. The history of environmentalism is inevitably politically charged, and this being the case, we should deal with it in a conscious, reflected manner.

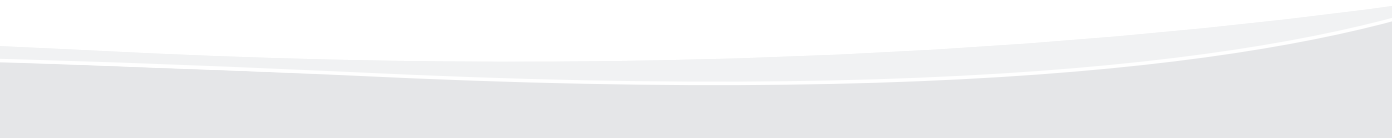
There is plenty of fodder for the politically alert historian. For example, there is a clear message for all those environmentalists who seek a rerun of the activist 1980s: the dream of a return to the roots is alive in every social movement, but so far, none has succeeded in this endeavor. Furthermore, historians can show that the resilience of a certain brand of environmentalism is closely tied to a certain generation. The German environmental movement is one of the few groups that has not had a change of generation since the 1980s, and now that the incumbent generation is going into retirement, new groups with different experiences are taking over. Historians can show the tension between a strong national style of German environmentalism and the global dimensions of current challenges. We are also mindful about the many environmental problems that have been more or less solved over the last forty years. From the historian's perspective, the German environmental movement has dealt with all the easy problems, and is now stuck with the tricky ones.

What all this comes down to is that environmentalists are increasingly fighting yesterday's battles with yesterday's arguments and clichés. The German environmental discourse is full of leftovers from the 1980s. We continue to talk about the impending death of Germany's forests, in spite of the fact that the forests' problems look different nowadays. We persist with protests against nuclear power in Germany, while other countries are warming up for a second boom in nuclear energy (or at least were doing so, before Fukushima challenged the rules of the global debate). In debates over the future of German agriculture, conventional farming usually comes across as "the problem", and organic farming as "the solution."

The political scene is a slippery slope, and particularly so for the historian, who usually prefers things to settle down before making a judgment. It is tricky to join a demonstration, or visit the Stuttgart 21 protest camp, and then go home and contextualize the observations in recent history. And yet the problem is not only on the supply side, for the demand for historical insights among environmentalists is still lukewarm and timid. Can we make environmentalism more aware of its past, and turn its history from

a burden into an asset? Can we bring environmentalists to see the past as a treasure trove of experiences, and as a mirror that sharpens their sense of identity? And can we do so without smacking of parochialism?

There is good reason to suspect that we are currently witnessing a resurgence of environmentalism. Many problems are growing at alarming rates, resources are once more becoming a contested issue, the Global South is finally growing into a chorus of strong and diverse voices in the global environmental discourse, and information is becoming a new kind of resource through the internet revolution. However, this new environmentalism will look different from that of the past, and chances are that we will miss the new wave if we continue to think along historical lines. Thus, environmentalism will need to know more about its history, if only to learn about its blind spots. But can environmentalism allow for the kind of self-reflection that such a path presupposes? Can environmentalism become reflexive, draw its strength from an open-minded examination of its own past, and thus liberate itself from the grip of history? It is not up to the historian to provide an answer here. But it may be a good idea to offer some help.



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