

Sammelrez: Where did Environmentalism come from?

Rome, Adam: *The Genius of Earth Day. How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*. New York: Hill and Wang 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8090-4050-6; X, 346 S.

Hamblin, Jacob Darwin: *Arming Mother Nature. The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press 2013. ISBN: 978-0-19-974005-5; X, 298 S.

Zelko, Frank: *Make it a Green Peace! The Rise of a Countercultural Environmentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press 2013. ISBN: 978-0-19-994708-9; X, 385 S.

Rezensiert von: Jan-Henrik Meyer, University of Copenhagen

The early 1970s were the days of the „environmental revolution“. This rather immodest self-perception among the first environmental activists has been widely accepted among environmental historians: our present-day understanding of the environment emerged within a few years between 1968 and the oil crisis of 1973. It includes three components: first, a political concept of the environment as a comprehensive problem requiring public policy action, secondly, the notion of environmentalism as a normative idea, or as some would say, an ideology, and, thirdly, environmentalism as a new social movement.

Nevertheless, there is little consensus about why and how the environment all of a sudden came to be perceived as a major societal problem, why the issue mobilized so much public protest and triggered the growth of a (new) social movement. Some researchers have pointed to the real-world problem pressures associated with the postwar boom, such as air, water and noise pollution and wide-spread suburbanisation. Others, however, have highlighted the effects of social and generational change. The postwar value change (Ronald Inglehart) from traditional material to post-material values supposedly helped to create a new awareness for the negative side effects of prosperity and mass consumerism. In other accounts, rather than such structural changes, individual and organisational agency mat-

tered in altering problem perceptions. While Rachel Carson, author of the dystopia of a DDT-induced „Silent Spring“ (published already in 1962) clearly remains the arch-heroine of environmentalism, in other accounts United States (US) President Richard Nixon unexpectedly features as an – albeit pragmatic – hero, too, who not only established the powerful Environmental Protection Agency but also pushed for the environmental agenda internationally, as, for instance, at the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment. Routinely, the Stockholm Conference of 1972 marks the definite international breakthrough for environmental issues. Most recent research on the subject has pointed to the relevance of the United States' experience but also to the importance of international relations and transnational exchanges in the rise of environmentalism.¹

A focus on the United States and international and transnational connections also characterises three new books that seek to provide three different, yet complementary new answers to the unresolved puzzle of the origins of environmentalism. However, they define the issue in question – environmentalism – in slightly different ways.

First, in Jacob Darwin Hamblin's „Arming Mother Nature“ (mostly American and British) Cold War scientists take much of the credit for the rise of environmentalism. That Hamblin as a historian of science – teaching at Oregon State University – attributes a key role to scientists is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, Hamblin convincingly demonstrates how scientists' growing knowledge about the environment went hand in hand with an increasing awareness of the fragility of life on earth. Hamblin's account focuses on those scientists who conducted research intended to enlist „mother nature“ into military service against Communism. During the Cold War the military sponsored, for instance, research on how to trigger earthquakes or to spread diseases in enemy territory. Hamblin argues that there existed not only a clear resemblance between

¹ Thorsten Schulz-Walden, *Anfänge globaler Umweltpolitik. Umweltsicherheit in der internationalen Politik*, München 2013; Wolfram Kaiser / Jan-Henrik Meyer (eds.), *International Organizations and Environmental Protection. Conservation and Globalization in the Twentieth Century*, New York 2017 (forthcoming).

scientific and military insights into the vulnerability of the natural bases of human civilisation and the planet as a whole. He also claims that there was an intellectual spill-over into early environmentalism. A substantial number of scientists, many of them ecologists, previously engaged in military research indeed contributed to and informed the early environmental debate. They highlighted the potentially catastrophic consequences of unsettling the balance of nature.

During these early days of environmentalism such arguments often reflected heart-felt fears. At the same time, raising alarm about potential dangers to human life and health also constituted an important strategy to place environmentalism on the political agenda. Clearly, pointing to imminent cataclysm was an effective tool in calling for urgent action. Such strategies became standard currency among environmentalists around the world as in the case of the German debate about the anticipated „Waldsterben“ (dying forests) in the early 1980s, which led to the introduction of catalytic converters in European cars and a substantial reduction of sulphur dioxide emissions in Germany.² It also continues to feature prominently in present-day debate about climate change or fracking. This kind of „catastrophic environmentalism“, namely the perception and presentation of environmental problems as potentially catastrophic and impossible to control, have increasingly been criticised as excessive scare-mongering.³ Today this catastrophic worldview and rhetoric seem more like a liability to environmentalism's credibility in current politics. By tracing the origins of this specific type of environmentalism, Hamblin contributes to current political debates in the United States on American environmentalism. He demonstrates that the critique of environmentalist doom saying was not an entirely new invention, but that such a rhetoric had already undermined the credibility of many environmentalists as early as the 1960s and 1970s (p. 199).

Hamblin's account is organized thematically, while covering the Cold War more or less in chronological order. The book is divided in three main parts. In the first part „Pathways of Nature“, Hamblin recounts the

new insights about manipulating the environment that scientists gained in the aftermath of WWII. The actual use of crop destruction in the late colonial wars, for instance by the British in Malaya, raised the awareness for the „vulnerability of civilizations“ to germs and insects. During the early years of the Cold War, researchers wondered whether the West or the East was more vulnerable to environmental warfare, to infectious diseases or the destruction of food supplies by insects or chemicals. Clearly, the complexity of Western societies was their Achilles' heel. However, many Western researchers firmly believed in the superior adaptability of Western societies, organised around the principles of the market economy. Regardless of their ideological stance, researchers dug deeply into ecological linkages, the role of biodiversity in the resilience of food chains. They arrived at a very comprehensive understanding of nature's complex relations. These insights also raised scientists' awareness for potential non-military-induced environmental hazards.

In the second part, „Earth under surveillance“, Hamblin examines the rise of the Earth sciences. Geophysical studies drastically improved the understanding of the geological preconditions for life on Earth, but the military research aimed at using this knowledge for potentially destructive purposes. While military needs such as guiding missiles or bombers in far-flung areas propelled geological and meteorological research, they ironically also fostered an awareness of the necessity for international cooperation. Notably, the International Geophysical Year (1957/58) brought together researchers from across the globe for the first time to discuss and analyse their data. It created research networks and demands for further funding which in turn produced an unprecedented volume of knowledge about the natural environment. For the first time, it thus became possible to observe changes in the biosphere on a global scale. Hamblin zooms in on US plans for what contemporaries actually called „envi-

² Birgit Metzger, „Erst stirbt der Wald, dann Du!“ Das Waldsterben als westdeutsches Politikum (1978–1986), Frankfurt 2015.

³ Ted Nordhaus / Michael Shellenberger, Break Through. Why we can't leave saving the Planet to the Environmentalists, Boston 2009.

ronmental warfare“, namely the manipulation of weather and climate. Scientific insights – such as tracing radioactive isotopes from nuclear weapons testing – played an important role in this endeavour. Hamblin highlights the role of think tanks such as the economists and systems scientists of the Rand Corporation and their contribution to technocratic perceptions of military – and environmental – problems. Not all scientists considered the consequences of massive human intervention with the forces of the planet as necessarily catastrophic. One of the most prominent experts at the time, nuclear scientist and so-called father of the hydrogen bomb Edward Teller believed that the human capacity to do harm on a global scale was negligible. Consequently, a nuclear war seemed winnable. Elected politicians were not necessarily willing to trust such experts and take such risks. In 1963 President John F. Kennedy decided not to treat „the earth as America’s scientific playground“ (p. 147), and put an end to „Wildcat Ideas for Environmental Warfare“.

In the third part „Gatekeepers of Nature“ Hamblin takes a look at the popularisation and the political consequences of catastrophic environmentalism. He diligently traces the rise of the environmental discourse. Rachel Carson was only one among many authors who raised awareness for the unintended ecological consequences of modern technology and warned against innocent trust in scientists’ moral integrity. The Club Rome Report of 1972 marked the definite descent into the dystopia of catastrophic environmentalism. Critical responses to the report by prominent economists such as William D. Nordhaus (p. 178), as Hamblin highlights, marked the beginnings of a long-term backlash, discrediting environmentalists as doom sayers and left-wing anti-capitalist lunatics. And this sowed the seeds of environmental scepticism, a lingering consequence of Cold War mind-sets.

But, as Hamblin points out, actual environmental warfare conducted by the US military in Vietnam, with large-scale spraying of herbicides, put the US government under political pressure. And, ironically, this contributed both to the establishment of environ-

mental policy in the United States and the international promotion of the new policy by the Nixon administration via NATO. In the context of Cold War competition, the US also took the lead in the UN from around the time of the 1972 Stockholm Conference and subsequently pressed for international conventions banning environmental warfare. The final chapter traces the fascinating links between military research and the advent of the climate change debate. In his conclusions, Hamblin highlights that underlying the rhetoric of destruction, the Cold War involved a real risk of annihilation. He quotes former US defence secretary Robert McNamara with the words: „We lucked out. It was pure luck that prevented a nuclear war.“ (p. 243)

Both Adam Rome’s „Genius of Earth Day“ and Frank Zelko’s „Make it a Green Peace“ are less preoccupied with the scientific origins of environmental ideas and environmental politics, but rather focus on the birth of environmentalism as a broader societal movement. While Hamblin covers the entire post-war period, Rome, who teaches environmental history and environmental nonfiction at the University of Delaware, focuses on a single event in a single year, the first Earth Day in the US in April 1970. This event, Rome argues, not only brought the breakthrough of popular environmentalism in the US. He also holds that Earth Day was a transformative and mobilising experience for the members of an entire generation, namely those who kept the environment on the political agenda in the US and promoted environmental issues in and beyond Washington D.C. Inadvertently, and without explicitly problematizing it, Rome offers an explanation concerning central weaknesses of the (American) environmental movement today. These concern the dominance of and reliance on this by now aging generation in the American environmental movement, its habitus, strong normative orientation, and clear partisan alignment, which have reduced the movement’s rejuvenation and appeal among younger generations.

Rome’s well-written account is based on a wealth of written materials – publications, the personal papers of Senator Gaylord Nelson, the event’s initiator, university archives

but also numerous private collections, and over 120 interviews with contemporary activists. Many of them turned environmentalism into a career in the newly emerging field. Rome's enthusiastic tone seems to reflect the encounter with the vivid recollections of a generation that moved into brand new political territory. Rome's book is organised systematically. A contextual chapter traces the origins of popular environmentalism in the 1960s. Besides the scientists who are central to Hamblin's story, Rome points to the – often local – activism of middle-class women, of the young and the Conservationists. By 1970, Rome argues, traditional Conservationists – the protectors of 'wilderness' and sometimes of game – had opened up to new environmental concerns. The subsequent chapters analyse what Earth Day was all about: the agency of the various local organisers, multiple events and a large number of speakers, for many of whom it was the first time to raise their voice in public on a political issue. In all of these chapters, Rome presents examples from across the entire US, including metropolitan as well as rural areas, university towns and industrial areas in the North, Midwest, West and South, in order to corroborate his main claim that Earth Day's impact was really nation-wide. The final chapter is devoted to these impacts, which related to the establishment of environmentalism in politics and society: the environmental news beat in newspapers big and small, the introduction of the environment in education, the spread of environmental publications, and the founding of local, grass-roots ecology centres, which provided crucial infrastructures for the movement and society. Earth Day also impacted directly on electoral politics: mobilised by Earth Day, the young activists of the newly created NGOs Friends of the Earth and Environmental Action also broke with the traditions of non-partisan Conservationism. For instance, in 1970 Environmental Action campaigned to bring about the electoral defeat of the „dirty dozen“, i.e. those incumbents in the House of Representatives with the worst environmental record (pp. 212–215).

Rome's claim that all these changes can be attributed to a single event may be slightly exaggerated. Nevertheless, his evidence

is highly persuasive. His argument that the short term mobilisation around Earth Day changed predominantly young people's hearts and minds and converted an entire generation to the new cause is innovative and calls for a more comprehensive analysis of the parameters of societal and value change. Clearly, Rome goes beyond the standard explanations traditional social movement theories tend to provide.

Rather than focusing on an event, Frank Zelko, who teaches History and Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont, explores how a major, but also very specific environmental group contributed to the rise of global environmentalism. Greenpeace is the epitome of the international environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO). Zelko traces its history from the early days of the Don't-Make-A-Wave-Committee in 1970 Vancouver, Canada, protesting US nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific, to the establishment of the professionalised structures of Greenpeace International headquartered in Amsterdam by 1979, covering a time-span of about a decade. Like Hamblin, Zelko is interested in the ideas and experiences that motivated the early environmental activists to undertake such radical action as trying to stop nuclear weapons tests by sailing through the test sites, or standing on a tiny inflatable zodiac between a huge whaling ship and a gigantic whale in the Pacific Ocean. Focusing on Greenpeace's founders in Vancouver, Canada, Zelko demonstrates that Greenpeace's core ideas and practices emerged from a productive encounter (and sometimes clash) of different generations and protest traditions, predating Earth Day. An older generation of highly politicised leftist scientists and lawyers, émigrés from the US East Coast, informed by Quaker practices of bearing witness and seasoned in the 1950s anti-nuclear and peace protests, met a younger generation shaped by the 1960s West Coast counterculture. These younger activists, most emblematically the Vancouver journalist Bob Hunter, leaned towards mysticism, romanticising views about native Americans' relations with nature and about the superior intelligence of marine mammals, and were open to practicing substance (ab)use. At the same

time, Hunter was a PR whizz. Deeply influenced by the media theories of Marshall McLuhan, he shaped Greenpeace's emblematic „mind-bombing“ approach. Zelko gives a detailed account of the different ingredients of this formula which accounts for an important part of Greenpeace's success and its influence on international environmentalism, but also the clashes it entailed between Greenpeace activists.

Like Rome, Zelko's study also relies on numerous, and invaluable, interviews with Greenpeace's founders, many of whom have since passed away. Zelko also consulted archival materials from around the world. His book is organised chronologically. He devotes substantial space to the intellectual, social and political origins of Greenpeace, epitomised by those individuals who came together in Vancouver to get on a boat to protest nuclear weapons testing first by the US near Alaska, and then further afield by the French near Mururoa. Zelko zooms in on the individuals and the local group in Vancouver, their problems in finding the necessary resources, finding a boat and putting together a crew. He covers the details of the journeys, and the attempts and difficulties of the grass roots organisation to develop a coherent communication strategy. In the second half of the book, Zelko describes how Greenpeace switched from the fight against nuclear weapons to the protection of whales and seals, effectively from the global environment and world peace, back to the territory of nature conservation. This went hand in hand with the marginalisation of the older, more peace-oriented generation of the founders, and the growing importance of the younger generation shaped by the mysticism of the counterculture. Zelko demonstrates how whales and other marine mammals were increasingly understood as intelligent „armless buddhas“. While in a Cold War situation the fight against Soviet whaling in the Pacific met with great public approval in many Western nations, the subsequent Greenpeace campaign against sealing in Newfoundland was less successful. Within Canada, Greenpeace activists not only encountered staunch local, class-based opposition, but they also faced political support for the sealers from the national government.

Finally, Zelko tells the riveting story of the establishment of Greenpeace International, which involved the unfriendly takeover of the hopelessly indebted Vancouver group. While Greenpeace branches had emerged around the world, notably in the United States, but also in various European countries, it was former businessman David McTaggart who used his superior legal and business skills to forge a global, highly professional environmental NGO by the end of the 1970s. And this environmental NGO was then based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, rather than in Vancouver.

Zelko's account is a fascinating read and a thoughtful analysis at the same time. Without making it explicit all the time, Zelko's account is thoroughly informed by the insights of social movement theories. In his complex story, he demonstrates how perceptions, framings and resources – time, skills and money – mattered. Yet, he also demonstrates how the political context offered different opportunity structures – an insight that anti-sealing campaigners learned the hard way. His story of Greenpeace International is a story of professionalization, a phenomenon which holds more generally for all NGOs.⁴

All in all, the three books provide important new answers to the question of environmentalism's origins: Problem pressures – the human capacity to do harm and the side-effects of mass consumerism – clearly form the backdrop in all three accounts. However, all three books demonstrate how both problem perceptions and human agency mattered. While Hamblin demonstrates the impact of scientific insights on an increasingly ecological perception of the environment as an endangered space, he also shows how the spread of environmentalism required agency: scientists as writers and experts as well as politicians moved forward to popularise these ideas and change societal values. Rome's account illustrates how an event not only popularised the new environmental idea, but also enlisted and in some ways even created – its promoters. Zelko's story also reflects a complex conver-

⁴On the German edition see: Ute Hasenöhl: Rezension von: Frank Zelko: Greenpeace. Von der Hippiebewegung zum Ökokonzern, Göttingen 2014, in: sehepunkte 15 (2015), Nr. 1 [15.01.2015], <<http://www.sehepunkte.de/2015/01/24711.html>> (06.07.2016).

gence of ideas, action repertoires and individual activists, which created the world's most famous environmental NGO.

While Rome's account is largely a US story, Zelko and Hamblin highlight the importance of global connections (such as across the Pacific in the early Greenpeace campaigns) and experiences in the colonies. Thus they contribute importantly to the growing debate among environmental historians about global environmentalism. Zelko and Hamblin also highlight the Cold War context for the emergence of environmentalism – with the rise of big science, the dichotomous left-right framing of politics – which continues to poison environmental discourses, and the nuclear weapons issue, which stood at the cradle of Greenpeace. However, their Western-only perspective invites calls for further research. Notably, it would be interesting to learn whether Cold War scientists on the other side of the Iron Curtain perceived the global environment in similar terms, as they did in the West.

HistLit 2016-3-056 / Jan-Henrik Meyer über Rome, Adam: *The Genius of Earth Day. How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*. New York 2013, in: H-Soz-Kult 21.07.2016.

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