The Greening of Everyday Life: Reimagining Environmentalism in Post-Industrial Societies

Rachel Carson Center

19–21 June 2014, Munich, Germany

Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Conveners: John Meyer (RCC/Humboldt State University) and Jens Kersten (RCC/ LMU Munich)

Presenters: Andrew Case (Michigan State University), David Schlosburg (University of Sydney), Fiona Allon (University of Sydney),Teena Gabrielson (University of Wyoming), Cecily Maller (RMIT University), Brad Mapes-Martins (University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point), Jonathan Clapperton (University of Alberta), Romand Coles (Northern Arizona University), John Mayer (Humboldt State University), Yogi Hendlin (Kiel University), Karen Litfin (University of Washington), Chelsea Schelly (Michigan Technological University), Jennifer Robinson (Indiana University), Michael Lorr (Aquinas College), Sarah Randle (Yale University), Jens Kersten (LMU Munich), Piers Stephens (Universtiy of Georgia), and Shannon Orr (Bowling Green State University).

The Greening of Everyday life was a multidisciplinary workshop which analyzed everyday material practices in the context of environmental action. The goal was to address political difficulties in dealing with environmental challenges by examining everyday practices. The workshop invited people to discuss practices related to land, transportation, and the household on themes such as property, freedom, public and private spheres, and new environmental movements.

ANDREW CASE introduced the session by presenting his paper on the popular culture of consumer ecology. He used the book *50 Simple Things That You Can do to Save the Earth* as an example to explore the popular culture of environmentalism in the US. Critics have often dismissed this book as shallow because it advocates for small individual consumer changes, rather than encouraging communities to make the hard choices necessary to tackle institutional and policy problems required for widespread environmental change. However, Case argues that, with these criticisms in mind, we should still consider if we can take this book seriously. For example, we can use *50 Simple Things* to reflect on how popular culture changed the environmental practices of consumers at the end of the twentieth century. Often environmental scholars have ignored popular

culture when describing the cultural history of environmentalism: by considering popular texts such as this one it is possible to form a broader story of environmentalism in the twentieth century.

DAVID SCHLOSBERG gave the second presentation of the session on a paper co-written with Romand Coles entitled "The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life: Sustainability, Material Flows, and Movements." The paper considers the flows and circulations of environmental practices and activism using three frameworks. Schlosberg explained how environmental activism is shifting from individual responses to problems, and is moving towards a more collective process. When people make an individual choice to purchase something that is less harmful to the environment, they are momentarily removing themselves from a problematic flow. However, this individual action is not enough to really change the flow itself. This, he argued, is the reason for an increase in community groups that are working collectively to find alternative flows for food and energy systems. With this shared effort, the everyday practices of circulation can be altered; this change of flow may also pose a threat to current power structures.

The session ended with a discussion of the papers moderated by **NICOLE SEYMOUR**. A theme that emerged in the discussion was how motivation related to environmental practices should be considered. Sometimes people carry out environmentally beneficial practices although their motivation is not related to the environment: for example, some might avoid the use of pesticides when gardening because they don't like the taste. Others may darn their own socks out of economic necessity. Both of these examples can be perceived as taking environmental action but without the intention of engaging in environmentally-friendly activity.

Following lunch, session two dealt with the theme of "Households." **FIONA ALLON** began the session with a presentation of her paper "The Household, Porosity and Sustainability," which was based on a study of water consumption and greening in the home. She found that that people who engaged in greening practices in the home—particularly during times of crisis such as drought—did so with the sense that they were alone and unsupported. People did not feel that the state would step in to assist, and so a radicalization of autonomy developed in an apocalyptic context. Homeowners had to solve waste and energy problems within pre-existing infrastructures, but they could imagine alternative systems and would embrace a different everyday water and waste culture. Allon argues that we need to recognize the values, meanings and practices formed collaboratively through a sociotechnical system; this collaborative ontology is formed over time, and we must recognize its limits and frontiers.

TEENA GABRIELSON presented the second paper of the session, "Making Visible the Toxicity of Everyday Life: An Anti-Toxics Discourse that both Greens and Whitens the Home," which examined popular anti-toxic texts of recent decades. Gabrielson categorized the texts into three main categories: 1. Self-help home management texts from the 1980s, written mostly by women; 2. Investigative reporting texts often written by journalists, which focused on the home but also paid attention to political context; 3. Detox program texts aiming to teach people practices to eliminate bodily toxins. Gabrielson's paper deals with the first two categories. She argued that the first category of home self-improvement texts discuss room-by-room how to make the home healthier, safer, and better. The underlying argument in the self-help texts is that by eliminating toxicity from the home it is possible to strengthen connections between family and friends. A class-based narrative is particularly evident, as most suggestions involve buying products and spending time on developing an ideal version of the home that would not have been available to all. The investigative texts in contrast originated in the 2000s after the popularization of bio-monitoring studies: these texts do not discuss how vulnerable populations may be particularly affected by toxic hazards.

Following the presentation was a discussion moderated by **MATTHEW BOOKER**: themes included ambivalence, autonomy and individual agency. Discussion covered how Allon's paper demonstrates an increase in individual effort owing to an apocalyptic context; the toxicity texts in Gabrielson's paper meanwhile represent a desperate longing for individual agency in response to a lack of government regulation.

The final session of the first day also centered on the theme "Household." **CECILY MALLER** began the presentation with her paper entitled "Homemaking practices of provision and Maintenance: Implications for Environmental Action." She explained how houses in Australia have steadily been increasing in size despite a decrease in the number of household occupants and an increase in public environmental consciousness. Maller uses social practice theory to make sense of this phenomenon, and to consider the reasons why people make certain choices. She argues that in order to reduce consumer consumption in the household we must look at people's everyday practices and mundane routines.

BRAD MAPES-MARTINS continued the session with a presentation on his paper called "'… alone in a world of wounds': Home Repair and the Environmental Politics of Tending." He began his talk by connecting themes that have appeared in the other papers presented. He pointed out that the question of agency was a central subject of conversation in the workshop, and so posed the question: What is potentially transformative in everyday activities? He argued that it is possible to change a person's beliefs if you change their actions, using the example of the Civilian Conservation

Corps to illustrate this point. He also discussed practices and how they might open society up to act more collectively, providing the example of mowing foreclosed neighbors' lawns to retain the property value of the neighborhood. Eventually practices such as this led to the formation of home associations, with societies grouping themselves into a collective mode. He argued, thus, that mundane practices related to home repair can encourage common and collective action.

The discussion was moderated by **MARKUS WILCZEK** and questions in the session included: how does the home repair scheme play out for renters? Where is politics in practice theory? Mapes -Martins also clarified how home repair and the CCC connect. He wanted to show the juxtaposition of very private actions versus a very public and collective project. Another point that came out in the discussion is that environmentalism doesn't always have to be happy. Engaging in community practices isn't always positive and can be challenging, but that doesn't mean it isn't important.

The second day of the conference also began with a session on the theme "Concepts and Movements." **JONATHAN CLAPPERTON** began the session with an overview of his paper "Making the Pacific Northwest Green": Everyday Environmental Activism in Metropolitan British Columbia." He researched the history of the environmental organization *SPEC* in order to investigate why and when environmental organizations succeed or fail. In the existing literature are two main explanations for why environmental movements fail: the first that organizations are held back by right-wing corporate interests, the second being that environmental organizations themselves fail to convince the public of their viewpoint. However, Clapperton argued that the reasons for SPEC's success and failure were different, highlighting that membership and funding dropped at two main points. First, the organization began to split between those who wanted to radicalize and become more political, versus those who did not. The organization also expanded, with many branches that couldn't agree on a direction. *SPEC* was not revitalized until they decided to become less political in favor of focusing on a few key issues and changing the actions of individuals.

ROMAND COLES followed Clapperton with a presentation of his paper titled "Circulation, Resonance, and the Alternating Currents of Radical and Ecological Democracy." His paper is based partially on a program he co-developed at Northern Arizona University, which engages students in action research seminars. These seminars deal with social justice issues and include classroom learning with hands-on practical experience in the community. He was also influenced by his research as a political theorist on new materialism, circulations, and resonance. Thus, he explains, this paper emerged from the wild patience of theoretical work, but with a practice based kind of

hope. With these frames in mind, his paper examines the dynamics of transformation around radical democracy in a praxis-based pedagogy.

THOMAS PRINCEN moderated the discussion following the presentations, which emphasized the theme in both papers of the dichotomy between connecting and disconnecting. Pedagogy, deep listening, and the importance of engaging students with this material was also discussed.

Before moving onto the next session a brief break was taken to summarize some of the emergent themes so far in the conference. Some themes discussed included: environmentalism as a vital life practice rather than as an obligation, sustainability in everyday life is important because it evokes a sense of agency, participation, and creativity, and the importance of challenging dichotomies including consumer/citizen, green/non-green, and material/immaterial.

The second session of the day focused on the topic "Mobility" and began with **JOHN MEYER'S** paper, "Automobility and Freedom." He first clarified that automobility is not limited to cars, but comprises a complex arrangement of roads, bridges, materials, oil, cultural imagery, etc. He explained how he sought to consider: In what way does automobility shape how we think about freedom, and how does this allow for a critical evaluation of automobility itself? Meyer developed four conceptions for thinking about how auto-freedom is understood: identity, control, market preferences, and human flourishing. He argued that often it is assumed that more movement always leads to greater human flourishing, however he wanted to disassociate from this viewpoint, arguing that more movement does not always lead to greater freedom.

YOGI HENDLIN continued the session by analyzing a different mode of transportation—bicycles—with his paper entitled "The Bicycle as a Social and Environmental Force: Analyzing the Current Trend in Cycling as a Mode of Transportation." By using his experience as director of the first Los Angeles County Bicycle Count as a case study he examined how bicycling can promote health, civic engagement, and environmentalism in a city. Hendlin looked at the different "types" of people choosing to travel by bicycle—from hipsters to commuters to the poor and carless—and their motivations for the practice. His LA case study also highlighted the opportunities and barriers to promoting cycling in cities. Finally, he argued that—in addition to health and community benefits—cycling can also have a democratizing effect.

The discussion was led by **MASSIMO MORAGLIO**. Themes included a reminder to consider power and gender in the mobility discussion, and the idea of autonomy was again discussed in the context of mobility. It was argued that cycling is a real form of autonomy as it enables people to

travel around solely on their own power. The means by which autonomy related to cars may be altered with the increase of collaborative consumption and car sharing was also considered.

The final session of the second day dealt with the topic "Lessons from Alternative Practices." **KAREN LIFTIN** started the session off with her paper "What are People For? Ontology and Sustainability in Ecovillage Culture." Her paper was based on a year of research in 14 ecovillage communities. In her presentation she outlined the commonalities between the villages and the challenges and successes they encountered. Interestingly, for many of the people she interviewed the most challenging and rewarding aspect of living in an ecovillage was the people, and many joined the villages for social reasons rather than purely from environmental motivation. Liftin did not suggest that everyone should create or join an ecovillage, but wanted instead to look at how the core material and social practices of the ecovillage could be brought into mainstream practices, from neighborhood communities to global governance.

CHELSEA SHELLY continued the session with a presentation called "Everyday Household Practice in Alternative Residential Dwellings: The Non-Environmental Motivations for Environmental Behavior." Shelly analyzed the choices and practices of individuals living in alternative residences, using three case studies in her research: people implementing residential solar electric to their houses, people living in sustainable homes called Earthships, and those living in what they call "intentional communities". Two major themes regarding alternative housing was governmental policies and the physical design of the housing systems matter. The way policy is written and intelligent designs that are easy to integrate can change the people's behavior. It was possible for practices to change in advance of their way of thinking. Shelly also argued that although these practices could be seen as "alternative" they were rooted in many classic American values.

JENNIFER ROBINSON ended the session with her paper "Making the Land Connection: Local Food Farms and Sustainability of Place." Robinson specializes in grower vender markets and has studied the lives, practices and motivations of local growers. She argued that the lives of growers should not be overlooked, and local farmers' stories and ideas relating to sustainability should be shared to bring local growers' actions into a more valued position. She believes the challenge is to bring local food growers' alternative way of living and working into focus, so that we see ourselves as implicated in growers' lives in specific ways. In her presentation she also discussed some connections between her paper and the others presented in the workshop. These included patterns of belonging and distinction, undoing dichotomies, embodying change, imagining possibilities, and recognizing that social justice means we all have a stake.

Topics that emerged in the discussion included questions on how to define certain terms such as "alternative," the extent to which people who engage in alternative practices are alienated, how we can live with integrity, and what it means to have a flourishing life.

The first session on the final day of the workshop began with the topic "Urban Space." **MICHAEL LORR** began the session with the sociological perspective of his paper "Greening Homes: Urban Infrastructure, and Everyday Lifestyles in an Age of Post-Democracy: An Exploratory Analysis of Chicago IL, and Jacksonville FL." Using Jacksonville and Chicago as case studies he examined how people in America approach greening their homes. He considered this in a lifestyle context, and how choosing a house and a lifestyle mutually support each other. He found many of the choices made regarding greening in cities were developed in a post-democratic context: decisions are not being made in a public forum, but are instead being made by the elite. Greening processes, for example in Chicago, happen in wealthier areas and do not always result in a larger sustainable state.

SARAH RANDLE presented her paper on "At Home in the Watershed: Spatial Politics and Environmental Imaginaries in Los Angeles." Randle uses case studies to examine the future of the waterscape in Los Angeles, and in her presentation gave the example of the Water LA initiative, which promotes water harvesting in and around the LA area. She pointed out the significance that this program focused on water harvesting rather than just water conservation, seeing it as a public orientation on a private scale. Through such studies Randle hopes to gain insight on how private citizens' practices with water can affect a city's water management and infrastructure.

JENS KERSTEN ended the session with his paper "Urban Biodiversity: Ambivalences, Conceptions, Policies," which called for a new understanding of biodiversity and its regulation. He began by explaining that the relationship between urbanization and biodiversity is ambivalent. Although urbanization can have a negative effect on natural resources, urban diversity can also be quite rich: animals and nature can adapt and thrive in urban environments. In the second part of his presentation Kersten worked to develop a new concept of the city and nature, and argued we should not view urban nature as "second rate" nature. Culture and nature influence each other, and by reimagining the ambivalent relationship between urban areas and nature, policies can be developed that promote sustainable practices within the urban landscape.

The discussion was moderated by **SHERILYN MACGREGOR**. Some themes discussed included how to use terms such as "neoliberalism" and "post-democracy" in papers. It was generally agreed that such terms should be avoided, or if necessary they should be clearly defined. Also discussed was the importance of context in geography and policy.

The final session of the conference engaged with the theme "Property and the Common Good." **PIERS STEPHENS** began the session with his paper titled "The Tragedy of the Uncommon: Property, Possession and Belonging in Community Gardens," first discussing the tragedy of the commons and how the main proposed ways to overcome this problem are Hobbesian regulating or privatization. He went on to discuss the notion of a tragedy of the *uncommons*, which can result from Lockean ideas of property rights. When excessive emphasis is placed on individual ownership and possession, he argued, people can become more disconnected and experience a sense of disbelonging. However, shared gardens are an example of how to overcome this tragedy of the uncommons: community gardens represent a basic level of collective operation. Gardening has a psychological significance, and can actually shift people's perspectives and improve concentration; it also establishes bands of belonging. Community gardens, Stephens argued, are a growing example of an activity that can alleviate the tragedy of the uncommons and promote belonging.

The last presentation of the conference was given by **SHANNON ORR** on "Reimagining the Backyard: Environmental Sustainability and Private Property." By researching backyards she observed changing ideas of nature in our private outdoor spaces. The backyard has experienced a merging of living and outdoor spaces: we now find gas fireplaces and couches in our backyards, and there is a particular aesthetic of the backyard in the United States in particular. However Orr argued we should think of backyards as an opportunity for greening: in order to do so, we need to think collectively about individual private spaces and public responsibility. For example, within backyards miniature wildlife habitats might be created. Orr argued we need to change our notions of what an aesthetic yard looks like. How we frame the issue is also important. Instead of telling people they should do something because it's environmentally friendly, it is possible to encourage environmental practices for other motivations, for example by showing what can be done to encourage birds to come to people's yards.

The discussion was moderated by **EMILY BROCK**. Some themes that arose included the question of privilege: Who feels empowered to partake in these community projects? A connection was also made between the papers delivered by Orr and Meyer. The growth of automobility can reduce safety because of busier roads: this has transformed backyards into a safe space from certain dangers.

The workshop ended with a discussion about what an edited volume of these papers might look like. Nineteen emergent themes were considered, and with discussion were reduced to the key themes the publication could be centered on. A decision was made to create a book that could be used as a main text in an upper-level undergraduate environmental humanities and sustainability

course, or as a supplemental text in a graduate course. Participants agreed that to the extent possible they should identify common themes, lay them out in the introduction, have each chapter gesture to these themes, and interlink the essays themselves. The papers are not to be a set of discrete texts, but rather integrated scholarship with overlapping themes. Key concepts decided upon included: everyday practices, emergence of possibilities, action, concept of relationality, and material flows. The discussion ended with guidelines for making the chapters suitable for an undergraduate class and a list of possible publishers to contact. The essays will be shortened to 5000-6000 words and written in a way that is accessible to undergraduates, without taking away from the richness of the content and ideas discussed at conference.

--Abby Bongaarts