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## **Environment and Memory**

### **Towards an Archeology of Environmentalism**

For environmentalists, 2012 is a year of multiple anniversaries. It is 20 years after the Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro, 25 years after the Montreal Protocol for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, 40 years after the Stockholm Summit and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* and 50 years after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. These multiple events show that when we think about environmentalism, we talk about more than a current concern. We also talk about events and traditions, about disappointments and persistent fantasies that resonate in today's thinking and action. After several decades of intensive debates, it has become difficult to talk about environmental issues *without* evoking memories.

*Environment and Memory* is an RCC flagship project that seeks to provide a deeper understanding of these memories and their meaning for environmentalism today. What are the key events that influenced and defined our understanding of environmental issues? How did memories take shape, and how did they change over time? To what extent are these memories present in specific groups and society at large? Do memories create opportunities for environmentalism, or are they more of a hindrance in the light of today's challenges? And how do these memories relate to historical facts?

*Environment and Memory* is a work-in-progress, and probably will always be. It provides a platform for multiple views, giving a voice to all sides while highlighting facts and contexts. As part of the RCC Digital Project, it is interactive, and we want to encourage visitor feedback as best we can. Perhaps most crucially, it links academic debate and public outreach in a way that benefits both sides: by providing historical background to current discussions, we can contribute to a more informed debate – and, conversely, we learn more about environmentalism past and present by reflecting on public perceptions and collective memories.

In brief, one may define environmental sites of memory as follows:

*Environmental sites of memory are historical events, limited in chronological and geographic respects, that played an important role in the interaction of man and the natural world. They resonated in history over a longer period of time, producing a multitude of political, administrative, cultural and other consequences that still shape environmental debates and practices in our present time. The memories at stake are usually fragmented, with active membership in environmental organizations providing for an important fault line. Environmental memories are not necessarily verbal, as they may be hidden in habits, routines, or iconic images. An inquiry into environmental sites of memory thus moves beyond a study of active memory towards what one might call an archeology of environmentalism.*

The following remarks discuss the project's methodology in more detail. Feedback is greatly appreciated.

- As we enter the second decade of the new millennium, there is no help denying that our understanding of environmentalism has grown increasingly unclear. In recent years, we have become more and more aware that what we conveniently call “environmentalism” is really a cluster of divergent paradigms: pollution, wilderness, biodiversity, climate change, justice, and so on. The fault lines that separate these issues, and sometimes bring them at loggerheads, are painfully clear to activists and observers alike.
- The fragmentation of the environmental agenda goes along with a growing sense of unease about its future. Gone are the days when we could conceive of environmentalism as a young, rising movement: some 40 years after Earth Day, we have clearly moved beyond the point where we could write its history as a series of stepping stones on our march towards a green utopia. It is completely open whether we are currently witnessing a temporary standstill of the movement, gradual growth or decline, or the birth of a new movement that we cannot understand because we are stuck with the terms and concepts of the past.
- In the 1970s and 1980s, many people saw ecology as a kind of firm intellectual ground on which to build the edifice of environmentalism. However, there is now a broad consensus that environmentalism is based on a combination of scientific insights and human values, and both were and remain contested. There is a multitude of social, economic and cultural concerns at stake when we talk about the environment, and these concerns are anything but stable over time.
- Globalization has added further layers of complication to our ongoing discussions. There is no transnational consensus on the priorities of environmentalism, or whether environmental concerns should merge with social and economic grievances – let alone on how to correlate them with the dominant trend of our time, the globalization of industrial and post-industrial capitalism. The one thing we have surely learned is that the times are past when we could conceive the agenda of environmentalism solely from the West.
- What all this adds up to is that environmentalism is currently facing a crisis of identity: we are increasingly unsure as to what it is, who should define it, and where it is going. Curiously, this crisis of identity coexists with a broad consensus about its importance. All over the world, awareness that we have to confront climate change, the extinction of species, resource depletion, pollution and other problems has rarely been stronger.
- The identity crisis of environmentalism offers opportunities for the environmental humanities, and for historians specifically. After all, times of crisis usually foster an interest in history, both in an effort to restore one's identity and to learn about the historical back-

ground of current events. *Environment and Memory* seeks to provide a platform for this timely exchange.

- In the search for concepts and approaches, Pierre Nora's idea of *lieux de mémoire* (literally, "sites of memory") offers an attractive point of departure. When Nora conceived the first of what would eventually be seven volumes on French sites of memory, the identity of France was in doubt. After the Algerian war, French was no longer a colonial empire; European unification raised the specter of a new superstate with unprecedented abilities to reign into national affairs. The fame of *La Grande Nation* was a fading memory, and so was the charm of its great master narrative.
- The key attraction of Nora's sites of memory lay in the fact that he did not embark on a desperate defense of heroic master narratives. Instead, he approached the problem "from below": he looked at specific events that had traditionally served as fixtures of national awareness, studying closely how public awareness had changed over the years. The national memory as it emerged from Nora's project was a fragmented one, a palimpsest of disperse events and recollections, devoid of a center or a coherent theme. Furthermore, the project showed that the pantheon of the nation, presumed to be eternal, was in flux, and had always been.
- *Environment and Memory* draws on two important concepts that defined Nora's project. First, it follows Nora in that "sites of memory" are not necessarily geographic places, and actually are not in the majority of cases. For Nora, Joan of Arc, July 14th, the colonial exposition of 1931 and Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* were no less deserving sites of memory than Verdun or Reims. In Nora's understanding, sites of memory are "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself".<sup>i</sup> In other words, sites comprise an abundance of symbolic and emotional connotations that open a window into our historical memories. Instead of "sites of memory", one might chose to speak of "icons", though without the heroism that the term evokes.<sup>ii</sup>
- Nora's second key innovation was to stress that memories are multifaceted and devoid of coherence. There was not one "ideal" recollection that people should could embrace upon the historian's advice – instead, Nora turned our thinking around and made the memories themselves an object of historical inquiry, calling upon historians to investigate how memorial traditions begin, to study how memories spread and change, and to highlight their social, cultural and economic contexts.
- As we bring the concept into the environmental field, one key problem emerges: environmentalists have usually a weak sense of history. It looks as if the exigencies of the present discourage a view at long-standing patterns and events of the past – while other social movements define their identity to a great deal through history, environmentalists prefer to define themselves through historical amnesia. Historians exploring environmental memories thus find themselves in the position of an archeologist who uncovers hidden

traditions. Few environmentalists take note of the fact that the international negotiations over climate change go back to the Rio Earth Summit of 1992. Even fewer environmentalists acknowledge that the Nazi's nature protection law of 1935, while defunct in West Germany since 1976, highlights an exceeding reliance on state powers in German conservation history. In short, a project on environmental sites of memory is well advised to make a dedicated effort to explain past events and their significance, rather taking their presence in collective memory for granted.

- This kind of amnesia is a special problem when it comes to German environmentalism, where activists eagerly sought to distance themselves from the past since the 1970s. As environmentalism became a key pillar of the political left, the movement's history looked like a burden that tainted the noble cause. The conservative, elitist, authoritarian environmentalists of the past, often in line with the Nazi regime, were anathema to a movement that saw itself as open-minded, internationalist, civic and democratic. It takes a special effort to show that distancing oneself from the past rarely works, and actually didn't in the case at hand, as the degree of continuity is significant. At the same time, the project shall make this point in a constructive manner, avoiding the kind of muckraking style that suggests a hidden, suppressed scandal. The line of reasoning is that we can make better policy and discuss in a more sophisticated manner if we take the past in all its ambiguity into account.
- It is quite obvious that the political context makes *Environment and Memory* a balancing act, and it must be clear that the overall project does not embrace a specific political agenda. It makes a case for taking the past into account and gives a platform for political views, but it does not take sides in ongoing debates. The one point where the project is rigorous is facts. Those who reduce the *Limits to Growth* to a warning of the depletion of petroleum, or *Silent Spring* to a diatribe against DDT, should learn from the project that they are wrong.
- Since Maurice Halbwachs' treatise on collective memory, scholars have taken note of the close ties between recollections and group formation.<sup>iii</sup> There is every reason to suspect that environmental memories are equally fragmented between lines of class, gender, and ethnicity. However, one fault line deserves particular attention, and that is the line between environmental activists on the one hand and the public at large on the other. Indications are strong that the perspectives of insiders and outsiders differ enormously and that environmental memories reflect this difference. After all, those who took part in the Earth Summit of 1992 may have different memories than those who merely watched it on TV.
- With that, I have already mentioned an underlying assumption that should be made explicit: environmentalists are a natural target audience of this project, and yet the project shall make an effort to move beyond activists and seek to represent all viewpoints within a society – including that of people who are skeptical of environmentalism or affected by its

demands and projects. In fact, juxtaposing the memories of insiders and outsiders may provide revealing insights into the state of environmentalism.

- So far, memory studies are tilting strongly towards written and spoken recollections, mirroring its roots in cultural history and, in the French tradition, Durkheimian sociology. However, environmental memories are also “written into the environment”: the Startbahn West of Frankfurt International Airport is not only an issue of contestations since the 1970s but also a very real artefact, with consequences for air travel and the local environment. The project shall make an effort to look into these physical and biological memories, and read them as a kind of “environmental commentary” to human discourses and dealings.
- With that, the project seeks to counter the exceeding focus on culture in memory studies, thus following on the heels of David Blackbourn who bemoaned a few years ago that we had lost sight of rivers, mountains, heaths, and many other kinds of environments in our history writing: “what about *real* geographies – if you will pardon that provocative adjective?”<sup>iv</sup> However, doing so requires a strong awareness of the distinct character of these physical memories: unlike human discourses, memories “written in the land” do not have an inherent meaning. Natural processes follow their own distinct logic, and reading them as commentaries to ongoing debates inevitably includes a good dose of human fantasy. At the same time, it is an indispensable part of a project on environmental memories. We think differently of, say, a quarry that was once attacked as a scar in the landscape when we find that it has turned into a small treasure of nature over the years.<sup>v</sup>
- Every project that deals with the history of a nation should carefully reflect on that frame of reference. That is all the more true for the project at hand since Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* were a conscious effort to treasure and shape France’s national awareness. However, Nora’s volumes include a good dose of critical self-reflections, and other volumes, including the German one, have made a point of discussing celebratory and shameful sites of memory alike. (On the other hand, the volume on Italian sites of memory showed that the road from sites of memories to self-conscious nation-building may be perilously short.<sup>vi</sup>) *Environment and Memory* builds on this tradition of critical history, essentially embracing a pragmatic approach to national communities: as long as people persist to think and act to a significant extent within the limits of national boundaries, it is important, and in fact crucial, to look into national discourses.
- *Environment and Memory* may turn the problem of the nation-state into an asset by inquiring more deeply into the “nature of the nation” – more precisely, the link between national identities, nature, and environmentalism. Where did environmental issues serve a particular national agenda, and what were the consequences? And is this link between nationalism and environmentalism in some countries stronger than in others? These questions are particularly pertinent to the German case, as something like a “green patriotism” has

grown in Germany since the 1980s. Simply put, there is an underlying sentiment that by embracing environmental credentials, Germans have finally found a harmless variant of patriotism. The project shall make clear that things are, well, a bit more complicated.

- The time frame of the project is not rigidly limited, but attention tilts strongly towards the present. While an archaeology of environmental memory clearly has to go back into prehistory – both Lucy and the Garden of Eden are sites of environmental memory – *Environment and Memory* departs from the assumption that our body of environmental thinking is to a great extent a result of the enlightenment and the industrial revolution, with particular emphasis on the time since the late nineteenth century and very particular emphasis on the time after 1945. This chronology is closely related to the theorem of the “anthropocene”, which argues that a new epoch of world history entered when humanity’s carbon footprint started to overwhelm the forces of nature in the early 1800s, and that there was a “great acceleration” in the growth of humanity’s impact after 1945.<sup>vii</sup> However, while the argument for the anthropocene rests on only one factor (namely climate gas emissions) so far, the chronological preferences of *Environment and Memory* are part of a more general effort on the part of the author to put this debate on a broader footing.<sup>viii</sup>
- As this project is moving forward, new questions and issues present themselves. A current issue is whether the project should include what Marc Augé has called “non-places”: anonymous spaces like airports, big roads, or shopping malls, where nobody feels at home.<sup>ix</sup> Is it true that these non-places are growing in number and extent in recent decades, as Augé has argued? And if so, is this a trend that *Environment and Memory* should look into? Clearly, as we are mapping realms of our environmental memory, we learn not only about history but also about ourselves.

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<sup>i</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History. *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24; 7.

<sup>ii</sup> There is no consensus on how to translate *lieux de mémoire* into English. For instance, some others prefer to speak of „realms of memory“ in order to avoid evoking geographic connotations. Characteristically, the editors of the German edition of *lieux de mémoire* were juggling with concepts until shortly before publication. (Cf. Etienne François, Hagen Schulze, "Einleitung," François, Schulze [eds.], *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte I* [Munich, 2001], pp. 9-24; p. 17.)

<sup>iii</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992).

<sup>iv</sup> David Blackbourn, *A Sense of Place. New Directions in German History. The 1998 Annual Lecture of the German Historical Institute London* (London, 1999), p. 15n. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>v</sup> I have made an attempt at bringing in these physical memories in Frank Uekötter, *Naturschutz im Aufbruch. Eine Geschichte des Naturschutzes in Nordrhein-Westfalen 1945-1980* (Frankfurt and New York, 2004).

<sup>vi</sup> Mario Isnenghi (ed.), *L'Italie par elle-même. Lieux de mémoire italiens de 1848 à nos jours* (Paris, 2006).

<sup>vii</sup> Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36:8 (2007): 614-621.

<sup>viii</sup> I have made this argument more extensively in my "Thinking Big. The Broad Outlines of a Burgeoning Field," Frank Uekoetter (ed.), *The Turning Points of Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, 2010), pp. 1-12; p. 10.

<sup>ix</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London and New York, 2008).

## Project Status

As befits a multidimensional endeavor, *Environment and Memory* includes several projects that speak to each other while maintaining their own individual character. The following list gives a brief description, together with their current status:

- An essay collection with about a dozen articles on German and global sites of environmental memory, scheduled for publication in 2012. As a complement to the online presentations, it presents our approach in the classic academic fashion. Unlike other essay collections on sites of memory, this volume makes no claim of being comprehensive or otherwise definitive. It will be the first in a series of publications, with a strong emphasis on methodological issues, mirroring the cautious, open-minded and open-ended character of the endeavor.
- A series of interviews with eyewitnesses. Transcripts will go to the archive of the Deutsches Museum, where there will be available for other scholars.
- An online presentation on German sites of memory, with interactive features that encourage visitor feedback. This German-language presentation will go online later this year.
- Building on the two aforementioned projects, a second online presentation will move *Environment and Memory* towards transnational perspectives. This project is currently in its planning stages.
- Responding to rallying cries for global history, the project shall make an attempt to identify global sites of environmental memory. However, the experience with transnational (let alone global) projects in the tradition of Pierre Nora is poor, and doubts persist as to its feasibility – not least because there is no “world society” similar to national ones. Therefore, this project takes off on a cautious note: with a web 2.0 feature, the digital project tries to get visitors involved in the search for answers.