

Too concrete

Jean Bérard

The emergence of environmental protection policies in the second half of the twentieth century is the result of compromises between protest movements and economic and urban development—change by bits and pieces, rather than a genuine urban ecological transition.

Reviewed: Stéphane Frioux (ed.), *Une France en transition. Urbanisation, risques environnementaux et horizon écologique dans le second XX^e siècle* (A France in Transition: Urbanization, Environmental Risks, and Ecological Prospects in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century) Champ Vallon, 2020. 408 p., 27 €.

Two social spaces have been studied to understand the emergence, beginning in the 1960s and '70s, of environmental concerns and policies.

On the one hand, an important aspect of the protest movements that occurred around 1968 was the creation of a "vast ecological network."¹ At a time of intense political and labor activism, protestors embraced ecology, experimented with different forms of communal living, and embraced theories rejecting the productivism of left-wing organizations to emphasize the need for a new society. These efforts were connected to struggles against government and industrial projects (for instance,

¹ Alexis Vrignon, *La naissance de l'écologie politique en France. Une nébuleuse au cœur des années 68*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017.

nuclear power plants and the Larzac military base), which made it possible to build political organizations with a foothold in the electoral process.²

On the other hand, these demands coincided with and in some instances were preceded by the formulation of environmental concerns by sectors of the upper state bureaucracy, particularly the DATAR (*Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale*, or Interministerial Delegation of Land Planning and Regional Attractiveness, a government agency responsible for territorial planning). The establishment by the government of an Environment Ministry in 1971 was a technocratic invention, grouping together issues that had already been formulated in previous years by scientists and experts in territorial planning relating to water and air pollution, noise, and waste management.³

The story of these different social spaces obscures, to an extent, the practical ways in which they interacted, whether at the urban or regional level. By taking as its analytical focus the cities of Lyon, Grenoble, and their surrounding regions, the volume edited by Stéphane Frioux brings to light the multifaceted course of what it calls the "environmentalization" of public policy (Frioux, p. 161). This process both united and divided prefects (as the state's representatives), industry leaders and engineers, state inspection authorities, mayors, environmental organizations, neighborhood associations, scientists, and unions. The resulting transition was the outcome of alliances, compromises, and retreats on the part of various actors. What came of it?

Concrete everywhere, greenery nowhere

Part one of the book presents the inherited urban environment and its rapid transformation in the postwar years. Warnings about the damage resulting from urban and industrial growth came before the war itself. For instance, after the toxic fog incident in the Meuse in 1930, air pollution became a concern. Urban planners worked on more rational forms of urban planning. But they remained largely "powerless to transform the urban environment until the age of welfare state planning in the mid-

² Sébastien Repaire, "La création des verts : une intégration idéologique de l'écologie politique ?," *Revue Française d'Histoire des Idées Politiques*, 2016/2 (No. 44), p. 93-125.

³ Florian Charvolin, *L'invention de l'environnement en France. Chroniques anthropologiques d'une institutionnalisation*, La Découverte, 2003.

twentieth century" (Frioux & Le Goullon, p. 41). After 1945, the situation changed, due to the industrialization of construction and urban sprawl, which resulted in the rapid artificialization of soils, the decline of farming, and the transformation of many landscapes. This growth-oriented urban planning, which sought to reintegrate slums and unsanitary residences and showcase historical downtowns, focused on housing developments, such as Lyon's Duchère district, as well as on suburban housing, and the creation of planned communities, like l'Isle d'Abeau.

These trends have their flip sides: poorly insulated and heated housing developments; the use of stone and gravel quarries; the proximity of industrial fumes; cement works; harmful materials in residences; urban congestion caused by cars; the artificialization of soil due to road construction; and noise. Urban planners and architects sought solutions, but they were "running after the urbanization train without ever catching it" (Baldasseroni, Frioux & Le Goullon, p. 85). Cars were a primary reason for this pointless race: to unclog traffic, it was necessary to encroach upon new spaces where roads could be built; to allow pedestrians to get through major intersections, it was necessary to build underground passageways; and to find room for the vehicles used by an increasing number of inhabitants, park areas of housing estates were turned into parking lots. The damage done by progress was hardly invisible. But priorities lay elsewhere.

In an original contribution, Renaud Bécot examines an extreme form of the belief in the virtues of the scientific rationalization of urban management: the period when Lyon's urban hygiene office decided that, to fight mosquitoes, it would use DDT on a mass scale. This insecticide, whose use in agriculture spread after 1945, was quickly denounced as dangerous. But this was not enough to prevent the city and the nearby chemical industry from using it. The resistance that mosquitoes developed to DDT led the authorities to employ even more toxic chemicals, before returning to DDT. In any case, "the choice in favor of poison was made fully consciously," until the practice was abandoned in the late 1960s.

During the same period, the Freyzin catastrophe played an important role in shaping the way public authorities sought to prevent industrial risks (Bécot, Le Naour & Frioux). To support the rapid growth in oil use, a refinery was built at Freyzin in 1963. It began operating in 1964 but blew up in 1965. The toll: eighteen deaths and 80 seriously wounded. The catastrophe provoked a major reaction on the part of unions and politicians. The victims received compensation and a long legal process resulted in "qualified" guilty verdicts in the 1970s, at a time when the refinery was starting to

use a "catalytic cracker" (p. 146). The catastrophe brought about changes in the monitoring of classified installations, which in later years became the responsibility of mining engineers. This reform suggested that major state institutions had acknowledged concerns about industrial risk and guided their response, consisting of technical solutions that allowed activity to resume.

An environmental turn?

This compartmentalization of pollution problems was challenged by the social movements of the sixties. A proliferation of activism and heightened media attention to ecological issues brought environmental issues out of "the realm of the upper ranks of state bureaucrats" (Frioux, p. 157). The latter sought to act in a way that would not hinder industrial development. Such "pragmatism" was "mostly disconnected from social movements," which questioned "capitalism and economic growth at a more fundamental level" (p. 169). The ecological newspaper *La Gueule ouverte* (The Open Mouth) spoke ironically of those "who see no contradiction in singing the praises of the great protectors of the environment that are EDF [the French state electricity company], Shell, Mantra, and Sanders" (p. 171). Conflicts resulting from these parallel definitions of ecological action recurred throughout the 1970s.

Militant ecologists denounced plans for a new refinery for which no site was ultimately found, the pollution of the Rhone River, and the destruction of park areas to open a quarry in Grenoble (Sibille, p. 177). They received varying degrees of support from mayors, who were sensitive to the difficulties faced by their citizens while also being drawn to economic development. Local authorities declined, for instance, to have the new refinery installed in their town, yet did not question its necessity. Prefects were the clearest embodiment of the state's expansionist project, as they sought to reconcile new environmental concerns with major modernizing trends, from the production and consumption of automobiles to washing machines and their phosphorus emissions (Frioux, p. 175 sq.). These conflicts allowed for local victories, as with the protection of Grenoble's "green hill" in 1976. Opponents chanted "pollution, repression, that's the bosses' mission." Revolution, however, was not the order of the day.

A conceit that has become widespread contrasts social groups that are committed to political ecology and those that are fighting to preserve their jobs, even

when they are grueling and pollution-producing. Building on the work of some of its contributors,⁴ the volume reconsiders the idea of a disjunction between ecological struggles and workers' struggles (Bécot, Le Naour, Porhel, p. 181-205). A good place to observe workers' environmentalism of the 1960s is the Lyon conglomeration and its chemistry corridor. At a time when union membership was high, the CFDT was at the forefront of efforts to think about "lifestyle"--demands, in other words, that went beyond traditional concerns with salaries and work time. The CGT's position was more ambivalent, but it also participated in efforts to connect the labor movement to opposition to pollution. Alliances were formed through the Association for the Defense of Nature and the Fight Against Rhone Valley Pollution (Association pour la défense de la nature et la lutte contre les pollutions dans la vallée du Rhône, or ADNLPR). Chaired by a communist mayor, the association brought together 52 towns and various left-wing parties, united local labor struggles, participated in the journal *Stop Pollution*, sought to improve the Rhone's water quality, and offered a specialized assessment of companies that released pollution into the Rhone in addition to taking them to court.

Yet such actions soon ran up against their limits. First, legal reforms introduced in 1976 did not give associations the ability to "win a case in court" (ibid., p. 194). Furthermore, heterogenous alliances can run up against hard points of disagreement between their members. For instance, opposing nuclear energy was a cause embraced by ecologists in the 1970s, but the Communist Party supported nuclear energy. Finally, the economic crisis, the experience of a left-wing government, and the 1983 austerity measures weaned the working class off the environmental cause. A split occurred between ecological activists, who tended to be university educated and involved in specialized work in associations, local government, and the state bureaucracy, and union members who were struggling to check their numerical decline and focused on defending jobs in an era of mass unemployment.

Municipalities became not so much spaces in which broader struggles found local applications as places where urban planning promoted better quality of life by limiting cars, developing park areas, and moving parking lots underground so that town squares could be redesigned. In Lyon's Mont d'Or neighborhood, there was a struggle to oppose a road-building project to preserve park areas, which now beautify

⁴ Renaud Bécot, "Agir syndicalement sur un territoire chimique. Aux racines d'un environnementalisme ouvrier dans le Rhône, 1950-1980, *Écologie & politique*, 2015/1 (No. 50), p. 57-70 ; Vincent Porhel, "Givaudan-France : contestation sociale et environnementale en contexte de crise (1979-1981)", *Le Mouvement Social*, 2018/1 (no. 262), p. 55-68.

posh residential districts (Weiss-Kervaon, p. 232-254). Elsewhere, the contradictions of the environmental transition impacted less privileged neighborhoods. Consider garbage policies: a 1975 law mandated waste treatment, but this process was not easily available in the region and no one considered shutting down the industry for this reason alone. It was in this way that a landfill project was imposed on Dardilly. It had been sold to residents with the promise that it would eventually be turned into a park. Yet as soon as it opened, neighbors complained of the smell and other inconveniences, as well as the fact that the materials placed there were not monitored. They succeeded in shutting down the landfill, but it remained in the state in which it was closed--a "waste-space" (Brunet, pp. 255-276).

Environmentalization is thus a process that focuses on the "definition and consideration of specifically ecological criteria in processes resulting in administrative decision-making" (Bécot, p. 212). But there is a big leap between "considering" such criteria and prioritizing them. The factions of the state that embrace the cause remain in subordinate positions and use their relationships with associations to moderate the tendency to prioritize growth and productivity. The 1980s and 1990s accentuated the trend towards the professionalization of political ecology (Frioux and Porhel, p. 304ff). In the early 1980s, radical opposition to nuclear energy still expressed itself through terrorist attacks using explosives, but, at a broader level, efforts that sought to link a left that was critical of socialist governments and political ecology generally failed. Ecologists "publicized the environmental cause during elections, particularly local elections; opposed major planning projects deemed useless, excessive, and dangerous for ecosystems; reacted to major pollution incidents and ecological catastrophes; and, finally ... [they promoted] nature excursions, conferences--in short, everything related to environmental education" (id., p. 285). Investment in scientific, technical, and legal expertise serving environmental policy found opportunities in the measurement and control of air and land pollution and radioactivity, as well as in the defense of protected spaces and species" (Frioux, Porhel, & Sibille, p. 331-354).

Ecology or environment?

What did these efforts achieve? On the one hand, "the skies of western conglomerations are less polluted than previously, particularly by sulfur dioxide. Waste treatment has improved and unregulated littering has declined. Cities are more vegetized and the space taken up by automobiles in urban areas has declined, at least

in historic downtowns" (p. 156). On the other, the decades after 1968 witnessed acceleration on every front: climate change, species extinction, ocean plastics, and so on--and cities, which comprise most of the population, obviously play a major role in these trends.

How can one think these contrasting developments--between modernization, contestation, and pollution--in a comprehensive way?⁵ The introduction adopts the concept of "environmental transition" as an "effective heuristic tool" (p. 16). Its usage entails some ambivalence, however. It refers to the "acclimatization of France to environmental themes," for which the two decades following May '68 were decisive (Frioux, p. 377). Yet by beginning in the 1950s, the book shows that this acclimatization was preceded by, before becoming contemporaneous to, another transition, with a "radically different" meaning: "the urban and exurban environment was altered over a brief period in a massive way. Tens of thousands of hectares in France alone were opened for the construction of housing, businesses, and infrastructures of various kinds" (ibid., p. 24). And even if, by the end of this period, the age of building big housing developments without a hint of green had passed, exurbanization persisted as a "silent revolution" that continued to extend the artificialization of soils, the need for roads, cars, and shopping malls.

If so, then to what exactly does environmental transition refer? One could give a limited meaning to what came into play during the 1960s: a transition vis-à-vis the immediate postwar period, during which the priority given to urbanization and production rendered marginal and inaudible concerns about balancing economic growth and safeguarding nature. The visible increase in blight, the rise of groups partial to environmental protection and the improvement of living conditions allowed environmental concerns to gain ground with national and local public officials. The environmentalization of public officials would thus be the icing on productivism's cake, once the shortages of the immediate postwar years had ended. What became of it once growth disappeared? Factories closed not because of pollution concerns but because of deindustrialization over which they had no control. The manager-state's quest for competitiveness remains a constant threat to environmental regulations.⁶ Faced with the deepening of the interconnected ecological and environmental crises,

⁵ I am borrowing the terms of a pioneering work that reinterprets the postwar decades: Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu, and Christophe Bonneuil, *Une autre histoire des 'Trente Glorieuses.' Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d'après-guerre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

⁶ Cécile Blatrix, "Moderniser un droit moderne ? Origines et significations de la simplification de l'action publique environnementale," *Revue française d'administration publique*, 2016/1 (No. 157), p. 67-82.

environmentalization became something one couldn't live without and couldn't live with.

Yet the book's title announces an "ecological horizon" without exactly explaining what the term means. Where is to be found? Presumably not in the environmental transition of the twentieth century's last decades, since the twenty-first century remains "uneasy about the means for achieving an ecological transition" (Frioux, p. 375). Perhaps, then, in the radical protests of which the book offers examples in the post-'68 years, those moments of "revolutionary becoming with no revolutionary future," as Gilles Deleuze put it. The history of ecology has taught us not to take the critical theories of the sixties as major breaks⁷ and the story of their "little deaths"⁸ unquestionably offers food for thought. The fact remains that '68 was still the last moment, before the present, of theoretical and practical experimentation seeking to transform in a unified way various forms of domination--productivism, masculinism, and racism.

The ecological horizon developed during these years is thus one of the sources of environmental acclimatization, even as it points in a fundamentally different direction. The role and the form of public institutions, from the state to city government, in the ecological bifurcation of our society are the subject of intense debates.⁹ The history of cities in the second half of the twentieth century cannot, of course, settle these debates, but it can at least shed light on what distinguishes many pressing contemporary concerns from the pursuit of small environmental steps by public officials concerned with economic development. The great transformation will not be a gentrified eco-neighborhood.¹⁰

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⁷ Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "Désintellectualiser la critique est fondamental pour avancer", *Ballast*, June 2018.

⁸ Céline Pessis and Sara Angeli Aguiton, "Entre occultation volontaire et régulation publique : les petites morts de la critique radicale des sciences", *Écologie & politique*, 2015/2 (No. 51), p. 93-105.

⁹ For example, Jérôme Baschet, *Basculements. Mondes émergents, possibles désirables*, La Découverte 2021, which discusses Frédéric Lordon's *Vivre sans ? Institutions, police, travail, argent*, La Fabrique, 2019.

¹⁰ For a recent example of a brutal confrontation between an effort to put an "environmental horizon" into practice and urban development promoted by a municipal government, see Lucie Dupré, François Jarrige, Antoine Lagneau, Yannick Sencébé, and Jean-Louis Tornatore, "Pour les jardins de l'Engrenage, contre la politique du béton à Dijon," *Terrestres*, April 2021.