

Political Ecology in France

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According to the American historian Michael Bess, political ecology in France does not have the dark-green hue of ‘deep ecology’, but instead is a light-green colour that combines organic produce and technological modernity. Is this not, however, rather too optimistic a picture of a country that is struggling to implement a real policy for sustainable development?

Reviewed: Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France 1960-2000*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003. (French translation by Christophe Jaquet, *La France vert clair. Ecologie et modernité technologique, 1960-2000*. Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2011, 402 p., 24 €.)

As the crisis deepens, the French presidential campaign gets underway, and Fukushima continues to emit radiation, what is happening in the field of political ecology in France? What position does it occupy in the sphere of politics and media? The recent French translation of Michael Bess’s book on ‘light-green France’ may provide an opportunity to evaluate the situation, going beyond the media frenzy stirred up by some recent badly written, caricatural tracts.¹ While the book was praised on the other side of the Atlantic, receiving the George Perkin Marsh prize of the American Society for Environmental History and becoming the subject of numerous reviews, it went largely unnoticed in France. The move to translate it into French as part of Champ Vallon’s new, excellent collection devoted to environmental history is therefore especially welcome, offering a chance to reflect on the current position of the environmental question in the field of political and social identity and in recent French history. The title of the book summarizes its main theme: after fifty years of unbridled industrial transformations, profound socio-political reshaping and cultural changes, France has become a “light-green society”. By this, the author means a hybrid world, originating at

¹ Particularly that of Pascal Bruckner, *Le fanatisme de l'Apocalypse : sauver la terre, punir l'homme*, Paris, Grasset, 2011.

the junction between technological modernity in perpetual motion and a persistent nostalgia for the ancient rural world. Our world is therefore the fruit of a compromise between, on the one hand, the rise in public concern and the environmental movements and, on the other hand, high-tech industrial capitalism that marches onwards. The light-green colour represents “not only moderation, compromise, and half-measures, but also the profound ambiguity that has characterized the reception of ecological ideas among the French citizenry” (p. 3).

The North-American Perspective

Before making a more detailed analysis of this theory and its argument, it is important to clarify the background to the author’s position. Michael Bess is a historian from the United States, associate professor of European history at Vanderbilt University, and the author of a book on the anti-nuclear protest movements in Europe.² The starting point for the book may surprise French readers because it is closely linked to the Anglo-American viewpoint, which sees France as a country that is particularly resistant to political ecology. This “widely held stereotype” (p. 19) has numerous objective root causes: weak anti-nuclear movements and nature protection groups in France compared with other countries; a lack of political clout among green groups; the early decision to opt for huge-scale technology and nuclear energy; and some famous events such as the Rainbow Warrior incident. Bess tries to respond to this stereotype, which he considers overly simplistic, by analysing the unusual links that have formed between ‘ecology’ and ‘technological modernity’ in France. This initial position no doubt explains the somewhat idealized view of the French situation as found in the book. Despite everything, the book helps us to have a better understanding of the persistent mistrust of environmentalists in French society, as shown by the continuing popularity of certain ‘eco-sceptics’ such as Luc Ferry and Claude Allègre. Michael Bess also makes a few welcome clarifications, particularly one very fair criticism of the inflammatory book by Luc Ferry, *Le nouvel ordre écologique* [The New Ecological Order], which is still quoted far too often despite the fact that the essence of its theory can be considered “ludicrous”, “preposterous” and “baseless” (p. 137).

Michael Bess states his position right at the start of the book: for the past 50 years, the rise of ecological awareness and environmentalism in France has created a new social order, which he calls the “light-green society” or “half-revolution” as a way of highlighting its

² Michael Bess, *Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud: Four Activist Intellectuals and Their Strategies for Peace, 1945-1989* (1993).

moderation, compromise and basic ambivalence. The book gives an interesting and often original account of the history of France over the last 50 years, putting environmental issues, which are often left out of the usual historical accounts, at the centre of his analysis. Although it is also based on interviews carried out in the 1990s, and on various archives of environmental movements, the book is first and foremost a synthesis. There is still some work to be done before we understand the particular position that environmentalism holds in French society and the paths that the environmentalization process has taken. On a number of points, the author's analyses are therefore fragmented, alternating between general developments and case studies. His originality lies above all in his efforts to weave together multiple threads that usually remain separate.

Longstanding Tension

The author constructs his argument in line with a dialectic movement that explores four points in succession. First of all, it describes the “post-war acceleration” and the commitment made by successive governments (both left- and right-wing) to modernising and transforming the nation. After 1945, when France was still a largely rural country, the elite converted *en masse* to technological progress, which was seen as the condition of recovery and national greatness. The author thus recalls the great technological sagas of the post-war period, such as Concorde, high-speed TGV trains, nuclear power – those “machine/symbols” of national identity during the “Glorious Thirty”.³ Alongside this inventiveness, Bess describes the disappearance of French peasants, whose memory has long since haunted French political culture. It has to be said that his analysis is sometimes hasty, his choice of examples somewhat stereotyped, and the complex functioning of the state and the rivalry between administrations is never mentioned. One could also dispute some generalizations, particularly when the author speaks of “the French people” in general, or their opinion and mentality, which he tries to understand through literature, cinema and music. The style and examples he chooses also have a dramatising effect, which cancels out the division between account and analysis. These narrative choices can be explained by the author's aim: rather than give a history of post-war France in all its complexity, this is firstly an attempt to highlight a basic characteristic of French society that clarifies the particularity of its ecological history – France made a major commitment to fast-paced technological

³ The author's analysis borrows in particular from the work of Gabriel Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (MIT Press, 1998, 2009).

modernization and suffered the sudden disappearance of the former peasant society and its traditions.

It is in light of this longstanding tension between “the peasant identity” (exalted particularly by Fernand Braudel at the end of his life) and what the author calls “technological Darwinism” that the boom in environmentalism in France becomes clear. The second part of the book is devoted to this question. It describes the increasing power of environmental ideas and movements in France during the 20th century. The author takes us back to the “precursors”, presents some of the main environmental movements and their entry into the political sphere, and analyses the various intellectual trends that run through political ecology *à la française*. His analysis provides a clear summary, giving vivid depictions of a variety of people, such as Captain Cousteau, René Dumont and André Gorz, who have all embodied various trends in French ecology. The second part ends with “The French Green Utopia: A Guided Tour”, and the author gives a fictional account of what a village in the French countryside might be like in 2020, after the country has converted to environmentalism. This bizarre chapter, which resembles a utopian fable, could perhaps be a response to that of Jean Fourastié who, in his time, depicted the modernity of the “Glorious Thirty” through a description of a village called Madère-Cessac.

The World Goes Hybrid

The third part describes the emergence of a “light-green society”. It shows “how technological modernity and ecological practices came (rather surprisingly) to cohabit with each other, producing the uneasy synthesis that one encounters in France today” (p. 8). Far from opposing one another, techno-industrial modernization and environmental protest movements have been the two main driving forces of contemporary hybrid society, made up of organic produce, green industries and nature conservation and protection. Michael Bess shows how French society has become deeply environmental through consumer habits, an increasingly blurred distinction between nature and culture, the invasion of environmental issues in all areas of society, and the environmentalization of the state and its policies. Bess makes an original analysis of some of the most obvious paradoxes of our time: despite the fact that environmentalists have always been against the state, they have also given it greater power; even though manufacturers have always been challenged, they have become the most virtuous of all the environmentalists. He even says that it was seemingly the major

corporations that brought environmentalism its first success stories at the end of the 20th century!

It would appear that this is where Bess' analysis commits the worst offence, for it puts forward a highly idealized picture of the French situation. In his efforts to show that France is more environmental than his North-American compatriots believe, he ends up presenting a considerably watered-down version of the current situation. Does adopting an ecological rhetoric and making their language and logos green suffice to make the major French industrialists the heroes of the environmental cause? The picture painted by the author here is overly optimistic and would have benefited from a more precise field survey. Some data could also have been updated. For example, the author points out that there was a major qualitative change in the area of waste management, because in 1979 most of the 170 million tonnes of waste produced ended up in incinerators, whereas in 1996 the 627 million tonnes of waste produced were subjected to stricter controls and standards. That may be true, but at the same time the quantity of waste continued to grow rapidly.⁴ What is more, the author's argument seems slightly contradictory, because despite this general environmentalization, in an interesting summary of the French ecological context at the end of his analysis, he recognizes that the situation is rather negative: "In a wide variety of ways, the French are using resources more quickly than they can be replenished, and producing effluents faster than they can be absorbed" (p. 232).

At times, the book seems to be driven by an outmoded optimism that perhaps stems from the context in which it was written. It was published in English while the left-wing coalition government was in power and an environmentalist minister was in the government. He shows an optimism that might have existed – and still might – when a number of important decisions were made, such as the creation of the European Natura 2000 network. However, the situation seems rather different today; the crisis dominates debates and environmental issues seem to have waned considerably in just a few months. They were absent, or almost absent, from the Socialist open primary, as well as from the beginning of the election campaign. Contrary to the statements made by the current government, Sarkozy's

⁴ The 1996 figures now seem rather old, given that in 2009 France produced 868 million tonnes of waste. This data is readily available on the website of the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME) "Les déchets en France en 2009" (Waste in France in 2009 – report in French). <http://www2.ademe.fr/servlet/getDoc?cid=96&m=3&id=64346&p1=02&p2=0509&ref=17597>

presidency has done nothing on the issue except to establish, through the famous Grenelle Environmental Round Table, the principle of hypocrisy and deceit in politics.⁵

‘Ecological Modernisation’, Science Studies and Hope

In the final part, the author moves beyond the French context in order to contemplate the future of nature in a light-green world. He makes a long, fruitful reflection on the situation facing ecology and nature in an increasingly manmade world. We then come to realise that the French case was merely a pretext, and that the particularity of the French situation as described in the book is just an illusion: the light-green society is not particular to France, but is in fact a characteristic of all contemporary industrialized societies. The book contains a discourse on the supposed specificity (and exemplarity) of France, but no real method comparison is used between the United States and France or between France and Germany. And yet, only a truly comparative approach to ‘ecological modernization’ between several industrialized countries would have allowed the author to show which aspects are particular to each case, and to better reveal the many tensions and contradictions that exist between technology-embracing industrialism and environmentalism.

It is also surprising that the author does not make a more in-depth analysis of the new optimistic paradigm of ecological modernization, which is becoming dominant, even in chapter 10 which is nonetheless entitled “Industrialists as Ecologists”. The expression ‘ecological modernization’ refers to the new approaches taken to the economy/environment relationship based on managerial and rationalistic conceptions, considering environmental protection to be a condition of future growth and a source of multiple economic opportunities.⁶ These theories, which are becoming hegemonic, specifically seek to establish the ‘light-green society’ that the author describes; they are based on the belief – which is highly debatable – that the solution to environmental problems lies firstly in increased

⁵ The author does not mention the recent period or the Grenelle Environment Round Table, as the book was written prior to that. This is a shame because it would have been interesting to know his view on this political and media project. Two critical works take stock of the attempts at ‘greenwashing’ and political communication that are made through the Grenelle conferences: Stephen Kerchove, *Grenelle de l’environnement, l’histoire d’un échec*, Yves Michel publications, 2010; Jean-Christophe Mathias, *Grenelle de l’environnement, la supercherie écologique*, Sang de la terre publications, 2010.

⁶ This is all the more surprising given that the books written on this issue, which is still discussed very little in France, have multiplied in the United States and Northern Europe since the 1990s. See in particular: T. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourses. Ecological Modernisation and the Policy Process*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997; S. C. Young, *The Emergence of Ecological Modernisation: Integrating the Environment and the Economy?* London, Routledge, 2000; Corinne Gendron, *Le développement durable comme compromis. La modernisation écologique de l’économie à l’ère de la mondialisation*. Coll. Pratique et politiques sociales, Québec, Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2006.

industrialization. For Michael Bess, this was certainly not the main point, and the French case was, in the end, just a detour for him, a starting point for a general questioning of the ‘hybrid’ nature of the contemporary world. The author borrows from the language of science studies and follows the tradition of Bruno Latour, who proposed the concept of ‘hybridity’ to designate objects, or semi-objects, that cannot be categorized and whose numbers are growing steadily, calling on science, nature and humanity.⁷ These are social objects linked to technology, non-human forms that are proliferating in our world and shaping our relationship with nature and the future.

In this final part, the author abandons his historical account in order to examine “the philosophies of nature for a technologically intensive age”. He presents new conceptions of ‘nature’ that tend to gain ground as the number of books on environmental history and philosophy increases. He puts forward a very useful, clear summary of the different trends that oppose one another, from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to Hans Jonas and Bruno Latour. He also presents the debates and controversies – little-known in France – concerning the wilderness in the United States. In response to McKibben’s condemnation of the loss of the wilderness, for example,⁸ he refers to the criticism of historians Donald Worster and William Cronon, arguing back in the 1990s that this conception of nature is false and illusory. Nature is not humanity’s absolute other; there is no duality but rather a multiple, continuous intertwining, as Cronon wrote: “... we need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the others.”⁹

⁷ For Latour, the discourse on modernity leads to a series of ‘great sharings’, permanently dividing and opposing technology and nature, science and society, knowledge and politics. On the contrary, however, the world is made up of hybrid objects that proliferate and do not belong exclusively to the scientific or technological world, but which are simultaneously part of politics, culture and economics. To conceive of these objects as ‘hybrid’, Latour and Science Studies set out to establish a ‘symmetrical’ anthropology that would be capable of symmetrically treating – that is, on an equal footing – the different elements of which it is made up. Initially, at the heart of the analysis was the study of technological innovations – a symbol of the hybrid object that had been condensed from the social, cultural and natural spheres. However, it is problematic to shift, as Michael Bess does, from the study of a hybrid object to that of a ‘hybrid society’ understood as the space in which hybrids multiply. See Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été moderne. Essai d’anthropologie symétrique*, Paris, La Découverte, 1991; and *Politiques de la nature. Comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999.

⁸ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, New York, Random House, 1989.

⁹ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” in W. Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, New York, Norton, 1995.

Bess is therefore clearly part of the tradition of what he calls, perhaps rather hastily, the “school of hybridity”. However, in our view the book and its conclusions are also evidence of the limitations and paradoxes of this type of approach. Certainly, one can accept as a major step forward for social sciences over last 30 years the idea that all reality, be it social or natural, is the result of permanent co-constructions and continuous hybrid arrangements. A great deal of fruitful research work has been carried out on the basis of that perspective. However, this hybrid category proves to be somewhat flat and insufficient when it comes to contemplating the political issues of the present time. The asymmetries and power relationships in which the current ecological issues are trapped tend to be pushed into the background. As Dominique Pestre recently commented, this kind of analysis has now almost become a *doxa* that is reaching its limit, because the language of hybridity promoted by science studies helps to “make invisible the constraints that weigh some people down [...]”. This framing downplays social violence, makes it less visible and evens out the world’s complexity that always already has a structure [...]. This vocabulary brings about too uniform an image of the dynamics of our natures/cultures; it creates an undifferentiated world that is blind to huge continents of situations and differences [...]. It creates too simple an image of politics, made up in particular of people who experiment, arrange and progress – and who are therefore oblivious to both the systemic nature of so many interests and conflicts, and to the variety of methods of regulating objects and social issues.”¹⁰

These comments fit Bess’ analysis perfectly: in describing the coming of a hybrid world, do we not run the risk of overlooking the socio-political power relations that drive it? To consider our world as the mere product of a neutral arrangement between industrial capitalism and various environmental movements is to forget that the power relationship is not equal, that symmetry does not exist, that the power of money and self-interest are continuously developing instruments with which to discredit and silence critics. We know all too well that for the past 40 years multiple strategies for standardization have striven to discredit political ecology. The ideologists who have a vision of infinite growth and blissful globalization, blind to the environmental impact of their policies, are constantly endeavouring to swallow criticism.¹¹ What, indeed, remains of ecology in Sarkozy’s speeches or in washing

¹⁰ Dominique Pestre, “La politique des *Science studies*”, *Revue des Livres*, n° 1, Sept-Oct. 2011, p. 58-61.

¹¹ On this point, see the very interesting analyses by Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*, London and New York, Routledge, 2003; he studies the development of discourse on environmental issues in the United States over the past 40 years and reveals the shift that has taken place from a radical, apocalyptic discourse to one of resigned acceptance, orchestrated by the

powder advertisements? Our world is certainly hybrid, but it no doubt always has been, and therefore the particular nature of contemporary hybridity must be defined above all. However, one may wonder whether the light-green society is something different from the widespread victory of ‘greenwashing’ and the triumph of the market as the only authority capable of resolving the current crises. The book tells us nothing, for example, about environmental inequalities, the asymmetrical distribution of pollution and attacks on the environment, the situation in Southern nations, or the conflicts and wars that result from the pressure on resources. For these reasons, I am afraid I stand with the pessimists while Michael Bess finds “reasonable grounds for hope” (p. 293).

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media, talk shows and the policies of the Reagan era and successive administrations. In order to understand the place of political ecology in France today, research of the same depth would be necessary.