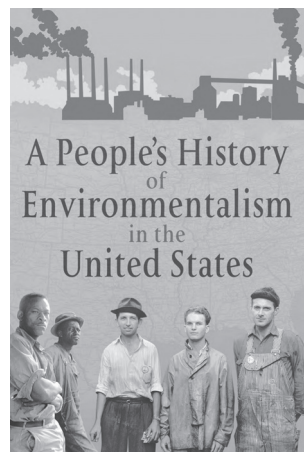


Recovering the Role of Labor in Environmental History⁵

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There is a prevailing current among historians of science that remains out of touch with developments in other historical discourses. This position is rarely articulated directly, but in practice is best summarized by the American political scientist and diplomat Henry Kissinger as, “history is the memory of states”⁶. This interpretation holds that historical events are best understood by studying statesmen, diplomats, financiers, and other political and economic elites who make decisions that affect the nation as a whole. For historians of science, this interpretation means focusing on the work of individual scientists, administrators, and institutions that were directly involved in the development of a given theoretical or experimental program. While there is a certain logic in focusing on the scientists whose unique insight pushed the boundaries of human knowledge, what is left out of this history is how scientific ideas were used and understood outside of the small, privileged community where such work was generated. This approach to history “unwittingly narrows our perspective and leads us to errors of interpretation” (Montrie, 2011, Preface)



In *A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States*, Chad Montrie intends a corrective to the history of the modern environmental movement that places its origin with the scientific and political awakening that emerged with Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* and the rise of environmental science as a separate academic discipline the following decade. This focus on the scientific and political leadership is a distortion of the past, argues Montrie, and represents only that portion of the iceberg that is visible above the water's surface. Instead, by looking deeper into grassroots movements of the previous century when farmers, factory girls, and labor councils faced industrial contamination with little political will to protect them from harm, Montrie documents how “workers and their families simply had no choice but to concern themselves with environmental hazards, potent threats to their health in their workplaces and communities” (Montrie, 2011, p. 11). Some of these movements would have to wait more than a hundred years before academics, politicians, and suburban consumers began to take notice and treat these issues seriously.

A People's History of Environmentalism begins its story in New England of the mid-1800s as industrial capitalism promoted a massive demographic shift towards increasing urbanization. Here, female factory workers in Lowell, Massachusetts joined America's pioneering naturalist and social dissident Henry David Thoreau in bemoaning the loss of natural spaces and species to the growth of unrestrained commercial development. Dams cut off waterways, depleted fish

⁵ Review of Montrie C. *A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States*. London, New York: Continuum Books, 2011. 187 p.

⁶ Kissinger H. *A World Restored: Metterrich, Castlreagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822*. New York: Mariner Books, 1964. 354 p.

stocks, and fueled noisy factories that were described as “dark satanic mills” spewing pollution into air and water. A young factory woman named Mary wrote in the radical “Voice of Industry” in 1846 that such mills transformed the vibrant landscape that she loved. “To add to the miser’s gold,” she wrote, is “to sap the life-blood from young veins, and fill the funeral Urn!” (Montrie, 2011, p. 23).

Following the Civil War, such views were acted upon as radicals working for the Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut State Boards of Health rejected that clean water and air were simply a privilege. They began to directly challenge industry’s disregard for the natural commons, arguing, “every person has a legitimate right to nature’s gifts,” and embraced “the duty of government to protect the weak from oppression of the strong [amidst] unwholesome surroundings and other unsanitary conditions” (Montrie, 2011, p. 29–30). Increasingly, lawsuits and civil challenges began to address the public concern for water quality and the impact this had for public health and environmental justice.

The turn of the century saw increasing efforts to regulate environmental damage and the risks to worker safety in urban factories. Upton Sinclair’s 1906 expose of the Chicago meat packing industry in *The Jungle* brought attention to both environmental and labor violations while Jane Addams initiated a campaign to rid urban streets of the accumulated garbage in order to improve sanitation in the city’s slums. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin the “heaps of dirt, broken pavements, breakneck crossings, and uninviting pools of filth” became an important concern of reformers and socialist trade unionists in their commitment to communal responsibility (Montrie, 2011, p. 67). Meanwhile, across the country, the industrial chemicals that would be dumped without regard to public safety began to be challenged and the political graft that allowed such abuses to continue was revealed. That these developments occurred overwhelmingly in the poorest regions reveals both the lack of concern from policymakers and suggests why historians have largely failed to explore this period in America’s environmental history.

That the science exposing the impacts of environmental pollution did not emerge until after the Second World War reveals the bias within the historical discourse, one that has presented this scientific research as a leading factor in the development of the modern environmental movement. It also suggests that the class identity of scientists, who were largely sheltered from the pollution that was a fact of life for poor communities, delayed research into a question that was not considered a priority until it began affecting suburban neighborhoods. By emphasizing the close connection between labor and the environment in his revisionist history of this movement, Montrie’s analysis provides a useful corrective to discussions of American political science just as it reveals the shortcomings of a top-down approach to history. As the latest addition to an approach initiated by the late Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of Environmentalism in the United States* continues to push the boundaries of our historical perspective and challenges prevailing wisdom at just that time when the global environmental crisis demands we adopt a new strategy.