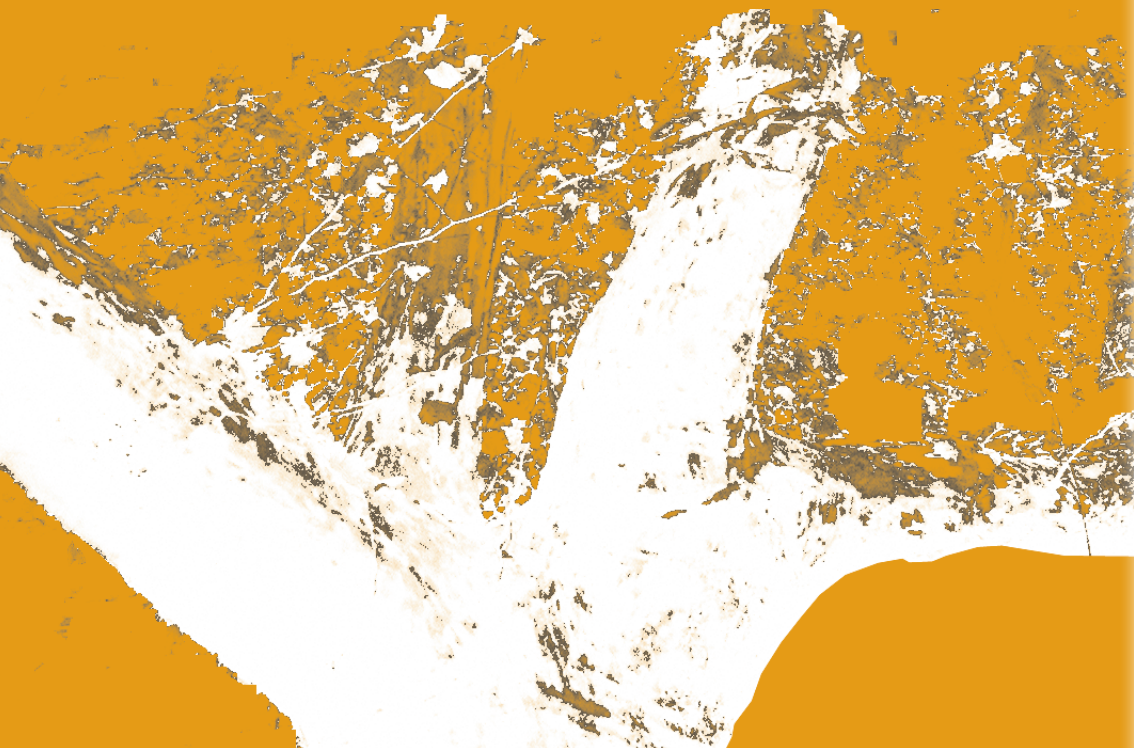


introduction



Environment and Memory: Some Introductory Remarks

Frank Uekötter

W

e no longer know where we are going or where we came from. We once had a clear vision of the future and its purposes, whether it be a restoration, unlimited progress, or some form of revolution that told us what we had to retain from the past in order to prepare for the future. This spontaneous anticipation of the future disappeared along with the natural perception of the past.¹

– Pierre Nora

In the 1970s, the identity of France was in serious doubt. The country no longer had a colonial empire. The independence of Algeria in particular was a serious blow, all the more so since it was preceded by an ugly decolonization war that raged for eight years. Charles de Gaulle, the towering figure of the Fifth Republic, had resigned as president in 1969 and died in 1970. European integration raised questions about national identity, the “trente glorieuses” came to an end, and the collapse of socialist utopias did not help matters; in his book

¹ P. Nora, “General Introduction”, in *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Vol. 1, *The State*, P. Nora, D.P. Jordan (eds), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2001, p. xviii.

Postwar, Tony Judt wrote that “the nineteen seventies were the most dispiriting decade of the twentieth century”.² And all this came on top of the traumatic defeat of France by Nazi Germany in 1940. Against this background, a director at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, Pierre Nora, set out to comb through the relics and search for what he called *lieux de mémoire*. In a time of doubts and uncertainties, Nora banked on enigmatic “sites of memory” that still possessed an afterglow of France’s national grandeur: events, places, names, or anything else “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself”.³

As it stands, environmentalism is facing a similar crisis in the early twenty-first century. Just like France in the 1970s, environmentalism is still around, but uncertainties abound as to what it is and where it is going. All over the West, economic and social problems have pushed environmental issues to the sidelines. The disastrous Copenhagen Summit of 2009 has shown the fragility of the global environmental consensus. Recent protest movements such as ATTAC and Occupy see environmental issues as part of a broad spectrum of grievances, if they recognize them at all. Events such as Earth Day 1970 and the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 are a fading memory, and so are the spectacular achievements of the 1970s and 1980s. Two American authors wrote about an impending “death of environmentalism”, and they were not even afraid of it.⁴

Of course, it is a gamble to compare the current state of environmentalism with 1970s France. Diagnosing a crisis inevitably includes a good dose of subjective judgment, and that is all the more true for the lingering crisis of environmentalism. There is not even a consensus on whether there is really something in need of discussion: the environmental movement has survived so many obituaries over time that some activists have become disaffected with crisis

² T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, Penguin, New York 2005, p. 477.

³ P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”, in *Representations*, 26, 1989, pp. 7-24; 7. See also id., “General Introduction” cit., pp. vi-xxii.

⁴ T. Nordhaus, M. Shellenberger, *Break through: Why We Can't Leave Saving the Planet to Environmentalists*, Mariner Books, Boston 2009.

talk. There is surely no consensus on the underlying causes, which may hint at an even more fundamental problem: in trying to grasp the ongoing transformation of environmentalism, we are approaching the limits of our vocabulary. We are not just lacking a consensus about the crisis but also words to speak about it.

It is even more risky to evoke the context that prompted Pierre Nora to embark on his memory project. We all know what followed, after all: Nora's *lieux de mémoire* became one of the most popular endeavors of French historiography, and a society on the brink of national amnesia became a society with an overabundance of memory. In the end, Pierre Nora's collection grew to seven volumes that looked into Frenchness in all its dimensions.⁵ The concept inspired projects in other countries, and we nowadays have volumes on the collective memory of Germany,⁶ the Netherlands,⁷ Italy,⁸ Austria,⁹ and Luxembourg.¹⁰ German scholars were particularly enthusiastic, as the volume on German sites of memory inspired follow-up projects on East Germany, Roman and Greek antiquity, and Christianity. The most recent installment is looking into European sites of memory.¹¹

All these volumes assembled dozens of authors in an effort to map realms of memory as comprehensively as possible. A special

⁵ P. Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 Vols., Gallimard, Paris 1984-92.

⁶ E. François, H. Schulze (eds), *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, 3 Vols., Beck, Munich 2001.

⁷ J. Bank et al. (eds), *Plaatsen van Herinnering*, 4 Vols., Bakker, Amsterdam 2005-2007.

⁸ M. Isnenghi (ed.), *I Luoghi della Memoria*, 3 Vols., Laterza, Rome 1996-1997.

⁹ E. Brix, E. Bruckmüller, H. Stekl (eds), *Memoria Austriae I-III*, Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, Vienna 2004-2005.

¹⁰ S. Kmec et al. (eds), *Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg: Usages du passé et construction nationale*, Éditions de Saint Paul, Luxembourg 2008.

¹¹ M. Sabrow (ed.), *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, Beck, Munich 2009; E. Steinhölkamp, K.-J. Hölkamp (eds), *Erinnerungsorte der Antike: Die römische Welt*, Beck, Munich 2006 and id., *Die griechische Welt: Erinnerungsorte der Antike*, Beck, Munich 2010; C. Marksches, H. Wolf (eds), *Erinnerungsorte des Christentums*, Beck, Munich 2010; P. den Boer et al. (eds), *Europäische Erinnerungsorte*, 3 Vols., Oldenbourg, Munich 2012.

issue with seven articles and one poll among scholars might look somewhat tepid in comparison, but caution has its virtues as well. A multi-volume project inevitably imposes a canon, putting the project above challenges. Revealingly, none of the volumes has inspired a counter-project that can stand on a par. But then, a canon tends to muffle the debate that these projects should stimulate: An inquiry into collective memory is a discursive project if ever there was one. In any case, the Rachel Carson Center's "Environment and Memory" project that inspired this special issue prefers a piecemeal, open-ended approach that allows for reflection and adjustments along the way. After all, when it comes to environmentalism and collective memory, we do well to be cautious.

This volume is the result of an exceptionally bumpy production process, and the reasons deserve careful scrutiny. An obvious source of complication is the article format. Papers on sites of memory are by tradition more reminiscent of essays than of standard journal articles: they are sweeping in their chronological scope and embrace experimental styles, they juggle with different perspectives, keep an eye on groups with distinct readings and their change over time – and all that within the word limits of classic journal articles. That makes them open to charges of superficiality, and the only legitimate defense is that brevity and essayistic brilliance have merits, too.

A second complication arises from the status of outreach within academic scholarship. Publications about sites of memory usually aim for a broad audience beyond the ivory tower. In fact, it was one of the chief attractions of Pierre Nora's inaugural project that he enlisted some of the leading historians of France. However, outreach still carries the air of a second-rate activity, at a distance from the core tasks of scholarly research, and frequently delegated to underlings with special pedagogical training. The recent surge of interest in memory studies within academia has probably dispersed that suspicion to a certain extent, but has not purged the stigma entirely.

However, the biggest difficulty is the complicated relationship between environmentalism and its history. Memory studies seek to lead environmental history into an exchange with the current environmental movement, and that brings scholars into the midst of a messy relationship. Furthermore, it seems that the link between environmentalism and environmental history has grown more complicated in recent years, and as it stands, environmentalism has both too little and too much memory. Historical scholars are usually quick to point out that there is no escape from the pall of history, but that usually does not keep people from trying.

Things were still easy for the first generation of environmental historians, most of whom were self-identified environmentalists. Memory was an issue from the movement's inception: Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, originally published in 1967, was nothing short of an inquiry into the collective environmental memory of a nation.¹² The endeavor obviously struck a nerve. In 1981, the *Los Angeles Times* listed Nash's voluminous treatise among the 100 most influential books published in the United States over the previous quarter century, and *Outside Magazine* included it in a survey of "books that changed our world".¹³ In such a reading, environmental history was the story of (mostly) men who started a legacy that environmentalists should honor.

Hagiographic approaches have lost much of their appeal since the early days, though last year's anniversary of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* served as a reminder that it is still around.¹⁴ Partisan fervor is usually not a good way to earn academic credentials, and the celebration of grandiose deeds from earlier generations faded into the background as environmental history found its place in the

¹² R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1967.

¹³ <http://yalepress.yale.edu/book.asp?isbn=9780300091229> (accessed 22 June 2013).

¹⁴ C. Mauch, "Saint Rachel", in "Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*: Encounters and Legacies", L. Culver, C. Mauch, K. Ritson (eds), *RCC Perspectives*, 2012, 7, pp. 49-52.

common history curriculum. There was remarkably little backlash: few scholars sought to debunk heroism with muckraking critiques. What took the place of environmentalist sympathies was not so much critical distance as indifference.

Neither did the environmental movement show excessive interest in hero worship. As such, the environmental movement never gained the hallmarks of a charismatic movement in the Weberian sense. We can see that in the interesting fact that a number of international icons were deeply unpopular within their home countries; Germany's Petra Kelly, France's Jacques-Yves Cousteau, and Brazil's José Lutzenberger may serve as examples.¹⁵ Among the 22 scholars who offered suggestions for the green collective memory of the world in the poll included in this volume, only one proposed an individual.

While environmental historians have become disenchanted with environmentalism, environmentalists have been negligent about their past. Environmentalism's overwhelming concern with the present and the future has found a reflection in a vocabulary that is seemingly devoid of history: ecology, wilderness, Gaia, peace with nature, sustainability, biodiversity, climate change, no-risk. Even the Anthropocene, originally a historical argument about assigning geological epochs, is currently being hijacked to nourish a discourse about the future. For many environmentalists, history is a distraction at best and a burden at worst.

But is the environmental debate really taking place outside of history? The articles in this volume suggest, on the contrary, that the environmental discourse is full of history; it's just that we don't

¹⁵ S. Richter, *Die Aktivistin: Das Leben der Petra Kelly*, DVA, Munich 2010; M. Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2003, p. 72; K. Niebauer, *Ökologische Krise und Umweltbewegung auf der Akteursebene: Ideenwelt, Handlungsstrategie und Selbstverständnis von José A. Lutzenberger (1968 bis 1992)*, Master's thesis, Free University of Berlin, 2012.

recognize it. People enjoy their time on Germany's North Sea coast and worship the Wadden Sea National Park but they fail to note that their holiday destination is a product of human history. They invoke "the groundnut scheme" or "Chernobyl" in ongoing debates as if these words needed no further elaboration. Germans talk about a disastrous "GAU" on issues ranging from fashion to papal speeches while the origins of the concept in debates over nuclear safety are falling into oblivion.

Historical background matters. Karena Kalmbach's discussion of Chernobyl shows that what anti-nuclear activists perceive as a one-word indictment is actually more ambiguous, and not just with a view to the notorious proponents of nuclear power who perceive the memory of Chernobyl as a cause of "radiophobia". In the French context, the event is not so much about nuclear power as about professional elitism. While people have heaped scorn on the folly of the groundnut scheme, Stefan Esselborn notes that biofuel investors are currently establishing similar *jatropha* plantations in Tanzania without paying the least attention to lessons from history. Timothy LeCain can provide people with some ideas as they stand on the viewing stand of the Berkeley Pit and look into a gaping hole. And we think differently about the pipelines that connect Russia and Germany when we follow Jeannette Prochnow and recognize the Cold War roots of this iron entanglement. Why have we forgotten about the rationale of *détente* that made the construction of pipelines such an attractive idea in the seventies?

Once we recognize these historical contexts, we can learn a lot from memories of environmental conflict. Anna-Katharina Wöbse's discussion of the conflict over the Knechtsand sandbank – once a bombing practice site, now a nature reserve – looks almost like a blueprint for conservation struggles: divergent views from locals and tourists, the advantages and disadvantages of remoteness, the unifying power of a public campaign and the painful disintegration after victory, and the perennial bickering about the right nature, the right cause, and the right path towards change. Germans will be more careful when talking about a "GAU" in everyday speech after reading Joachim Radkau's essay. As he makes clear, the concept suggests

an absolute certainty about judgment, and that certainty fell apart in dramatic fashion in the nuclear debate of the sixties.

Environmental historians can gain a lot of inspiration from memory studies. And the exchange is probably not a one-way street. Going through these papers, we can recognize the significance of the material for students of environmental memories. In this special issue, matter matters, in many different forms: in the shifting sands of the Knechtsand dunes; in the landscape that the groundnut scheme left behind; in the steel grid that connects Russia and Germany; in the toxic sludge of Montana and the radioactive isotopes of the Ukraine. Memory implies a profoundly substantial dimension, and the following articles show that these material memories are neither static nor irrelevant.

In the wake of the cultural turn, memory studies are having a hard time coming to terms with the material. But environmental memories reveal that a focus on discourses would be exceedingly shallow: we would lose crucial dimensions in our inquiries if we saw the non-human world as a mere backdrop. There is substance in memory; the environment provides a commentary on human recollection in all sorts of modes: ironic, heroic, tragic. The snow geese that died in the Berkeley Pit lacked the power to speak, but they surely made a statement.

Material memories are not beyond history: They are subject to the familiar entanglements that characterize modern societies. Memory scholars have long recognized the significance of actor groups; ignoring the social context of commemoration ultimately leads to a vague, people-less narrative hovering above the terrain in a strangely disconnected and ultimately implausible way. In fact, we can take a cue from these essays to speak more about corporate interests in memory studies. It is no coincidence that this issue on environment and memory is full of industrial heavyweights: Anaconda Copper, Unilever, Gazprom, EDF, RWE. We can see them engaged in all-out efforts to define environmental memories in order to protect controversial energy deals. And we can see them fail: the concept of

a “worst-case scenario” would have been a great trump card for the nuclear complex if it had not been debunked by the complexity of a hazardous technology.

Understanding the environment as memory is a provocative approach, and we can see some of the authors wrestling with the methodological and theoretical implications. But there are also potential gains. Taking stock of material memories makes for a good response to the charges of elite bias that many projects on sites of memory have drawn. Sites of memory such as Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* or the epic *Nibelungenlied* obviously target an educated audience. But when it comes to the environment, people become involved irrespective of whether they have heard of madeleine cakes or Siegfried. All they need to do is to open a gas faucet or to look into an abandoned pit. Complicity in material memories is a matter of daily use as much as awareness.

Of course, matter does not make sense as such; but then, what does nowadays? According to Nora, the rise of *lieux de mémoire* correlates with the disappearance of *milieux de mémoire*, and with these milieus go the certainties about reading the world: Interpretations that were once a given became destabilized and become subject to reflection and debate, never able to settle into a new milieu. The great master narratives were gone, but fragments remained – leftovers that still possessed an afterglow of a bygone fame. The concept of sites of memory was one of the more rewarding ways to take stock of them.

It is comforting to evoke this situation, as it provides us with a quantum of solace as we reflect on the lingering crisis of environmentalism. It is not that environmentalism is alone in its sense of disorientation – the opposite is true: It is going through an experience long familiar to the other side. The struggle between opposing worldviews has given way to struggles over specific events and places. This is liberating in some respects: The certainty about the past and the future that Nora evokes so nostalgically in the introductory quote to this essay surely brought a stifling intellectual mustiness

with it. Nowadays we disagree over icons, anniversaries, and stories.

In his 2013 address as president of the American Historical Association, William Cronon urged historians to polish their storytelling skills.¹⁶ Among the numerous issues at stake in his call to arms, this volume highlights one that holds particular relevance for environmental historians. Looking at the Berkeley Pit, the Chernobyl sarcophagus, or the eroding *Knechtsand* bank, it is hard to avoid a feeling that memories of environmental crisis *do not make sense*. Events evoke a diffuse feeling of remorse that future generations will have to live with this legacy, and little else.

Faced with a similar challenge, Pierre Nora opted for melancholia, giving his collection, in Hue-Tam Ho Tai's words, "a strong autumnal quality".¹⁷ Environmentalism is surely lacking that brash air of youth nowadays that powered it in the seventies and eighties, and yet a diffuse longing for the past is usually less than helpful when dealing with a crisis. And who knows: maybe scholars will one day be amazed that we were standing on the verge of a new green boom in our time and failed to recognize it because we were thinking with terms and concepts from a bygone era. Inquiries into the collective memory allow affirmative as well as critical readings: Learning more about our historical imagination can free us from blinders that we previously failed to recognize as such.

In sum, there are good reasons to proceed with caution, far more so than we recognized when we started the Environment and Memory project four years ago. The essays in this volume are a first step, an initial exploration that raises more questions than it answers. The door is open for deeper explorations into our collective environmental memory, both by the present authors and others, as the present

¹⁶ W. Cronon, "Storytelling", in *American Historical Review*, 118, 2013, pp. 1-19.

¹⁷ H.T. Ho Tai, "Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory", in *American Historical Review*, 106, 2001, p. 909.

essays, for all their merits, have barely scratched the surface of the topic. Environment and Memory is one of those rare projects where scholarly and political rationales converge: Given the prevalence of bits of memory all around us, there is probably no way to talk about environmental issues nowadays *without* evoking memories. The question is whether we take up that challenge.