

Review : Environnement et société. Une analyse sociologique de la question environnementale

By Chantal Aspe and Marie Jacqué

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This book, from two French scholars at the Université d'Aix-Marseille (in southern France), is an impressive but overlooked synthesis of environmental sociology. From the start, the opening chapter situates the sociology of the environment within eco-citizenship and at the heart of many European social movements, with two ultimate goals being clearly pointed out: altermondialism (or alter-globalization) and the stop of growth (p. 42). Both sociologists root their theoretical framework within post-Marxist thought and bring a critique of alienation, aiming for the defense of ecological struggle (p. 52). Even political parties like "les Verts" [the 'Greens'] are described and contextualized here since France includes an impressive amount of associations and movements linked with the defense of the environment (p. 54). Incidentally, statistics from 2003 demonstrate that 35% of the French citizens adhere to an association (p. 57). Concepts used here even include the studying of ideologies and the understanding of social class dynamics in post-industrial societies (p. 62). The interesting idea that environmentalism can contribute to the development of collective identities reappears in many chapters (p. 59).

Civil engagement and ecological mobilization are advocated throughout with a variety of case studies centered on debates and controversies, e.g. the grouped opponents to a new railway or protesters who complained about a forthcoming TGV in their region (p. 67). Very often, the justifications and grounds brought into the debate by protestors were the preservation of regional heritage and the natural environment, especially the landscape, which has become a new category for civil mobilization (pp. 67, 96 and 98).

In Chapter 3, Aspe and Jacqué note the disappearance of the environment as a concept and the emergence of sustainability in French official discourses since 2002 (p. 54). Chapter 4 demonstrates how the ongoing ecological crisis appears like a symptom of a major contradiction with capitalism (p. 142). This strong critique of capitalism re-appears in the following chapter when the authors argue that the recent notion of ecological science allows some dominant polluters to reorganize their actions within another environmental rationality (p. 143). Perhaps the most grounded in sociological concepts, Chapter 6, about experts and uncertainties, explains how authorities tend to consult experts, thus creating a new culture of risk management and controlled security (p. 189). Aspe and Jacqué highlight how experts hired by governments or industrial groups can successfully locate zones where risk is less perceived in negative ways or unnoticed simply because populations in some regions are more tolerant to risk and environmental hazards (p. 201). The (too short) conclusion reconfirms the relevance of environmental education for citizens, although not all forms of environmental education are really conceived with an aim for social change. In many cases, the environmental cause only implies that nature is dedicated for human leisure instead of caring for the protection of wildlife (p. 214).

A few accurate remarks against nuclear energy are made here and there, although there could have been more critique in that sense, given the number of countries, including France, that still rely on nuclear power (pp. 122, 179, and 186).

Chantal Aspe and Marie Jacqu e's book is more than rewarding at least for two reasons. Firstly, their focus is mostly critical and their critiques against the French government could easily be transposed in other industrialised countries. Secondly, they used approaches and bibliographical sources that are centred within France with a profusion of French authors, which will appear like a welcome renewal for Anglophone readers. My only quibble would be the absence of an index in an otherwise very engaging book. Let's hope it will be translated in many languages.

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