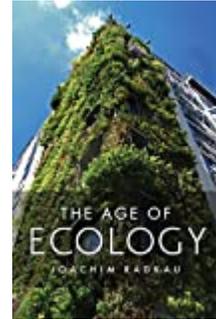




Joachim Radkau. *The Age of Ecology: A Global History.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. 546 S. ISBN 978-0-7456-6216-9.



Reviewed by Wolfgang Gruber

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J. Radkau: The Age of Ecology

To deal with environmental history is en vogue, which is impressively proven through a variety of new books in this field. Three books that are highly recommended are Alf Hornborg / J.R. McNeill / Joan Martinez-Alier (eds.), *Rethinking Environmental History. World-System History and Global Environmental Change*, Plymouth 2007; Regina S. Axelrod / Stacy D. VanDeveer (eds.), *The Global Environment. Institutions, Law, and Policy*, Washington 2014 (4th edition); John L. Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History. A Rough Journey*, Cambridge 2014. Not only the ongoing climate crisis (meanwhile affecting more and more people on earth) but also the rapid growth of new methods for chronicling climates of the past are responsible for the explosion of environmental issues. What adds to this interesting development is the increased use of global history for the explanation of truly global phenomena such as the environment. Joachim Radkau is combining both global history and environmental history into a single book. It is a rather ambitious goal for a single author to compile the history of ecological movements in one monograph. Radkau takes up this challenge and has done all in all a pretty good job in meeting it. But be-

fore we take a more in-depth evaluation on the book, it seems to be useful to know a little bit more about the objectives, content, and contextualization. Joachim Radkau is an emeritus professor at the University of Bielefeld in Germany. His areas of expertise lie in technical, medical, and mental history, especially in environmental history. He is considered one of the leading representatives in the latter discipline in the German-speaking world and has also acquired considerable reputation beyond.

The book *The Age of Ecology* was published in 2014 in English by the prestigious publishing house Polity Press in Cambridge. For the lion's share of the book, the English translation is identical with the first (German) edition of 2011, which was titled *Die Ära der Ökologie*. The highly competent translation was funded through Translation Funding for Humanities and Social Sciences from Germany and undertaken by Patrick Camiller. The first edition was supplemented with a 7-page preface in which Radkau comments on the recent developments that have occurred in the field of environmental history since 2011, with a particular focus on the tragedy of Fukushima.

The book is divided in a classical manner into an introduction (‘The Green Chameleon’), conclusion (‘The Dialectic of Enlightenment Green’), and six main chapters: ‘Environmentalism before the Environmental Movement’; ‘The Great Chain Reaction: The ‘Ecological Revolution’ in and around 1970’; ‘Networked Thinking and Practical Priorities: An Endless Interplay’; ‘Charismatics and Ecocrats; A Friend-Enemy or Win-Win Scenario?’; and ‘Ecology and the Historic Turn of 1990: From Social Justice to Climate Justice?’ In addition, three so-called data clusters (in total 27 pages) are strategically placed between the main chapters to demonstrate important milestones and events of environmental history in the form of short messages. Comments have been collected and provided in endnotes on a further 64 pages sorted by chapter. There is also a 30-page index at the end that fulfils its function satisfactorily and is designed for not yet experienced readers in environmental history. Unfortunately, the lack of a bibliography is painfully noticeable. Sometimes it seems as if the book is written in an encyclopedic manner, especially with passages where many important persons of environmental movements are described.

It is not necessary to illuminate all the various chapters in detail, but rather a synopsis is given here, whereupon worthy passages are thereby illuminated in particular, which is certainly not intended to disguise the basically solid professional expertise and craftsmanship of the book. One main element of the book might be that Radkau hopes to establish a new periodization ‘age of ecology’. While he admits that the more popular term Anthropocene is well established, he does not provide a solution why the community should switch the term. The true core of his book is the rise of environmental activism; here, he especially focuses on the time period since the 1970s (five chapters out of six). Additionally, he singles out an Indian author, Ramachandra Guha, with his *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2000). One of his not explicitly outspoken goals as he mentions and analyses Guha is to write a concise history of environmental movements (p. 4).

In Radkau’s introduction, he is making a wide circle to contextualize the whole agenda of environmentalism in the recent (or not so recent) scientific literature. Especially interesting here is that he also tries to incorporate non-Western literature or at least tries to know what is the state of the art concerning the agenda of his book. One point of critique could be that this intention of covering a broad geographical range of sources is in the end narrowed to mostly Western literature; this could

be remedied by incorporating more literature from the global South (although it might be more difficult because of scientific tradition, language barriers and many other open and hidden factors). He admits this himself (p. X). This is not a criticism of Radkau alone but of the scientific community as a whole. One of the big advantages of global history is that researchers can cooperate in a more connected way than before. It is not possible to know all relevant languages or all the different source bases for a single researcher; however, many of them try to do so. Build ties over national boundaries so it is not all about the dependence on English publishing that hinders researchers. I am aware about this sort of plea, but it is a necessary one and it would deal with the accusations of the various ‘centrism’ in a productive way.

The first chapter deals with environmentalism before the 1970s and covers ‘exotic’ themes (forest conservation is often the starting point of environmental movements). But Radkau also makes clear that environmentalism does not start in 1970, which he highlights with many preceding cases. He starts already in the 1730s in India where he mentions examples of deadly tree hugging (‘loggers working for the maharajah of jodhpur axed to death 363 (mostly female) villagers led by Amrita Devi, who had clung to kherji tress [...] marked down for felling, not only in defense of their property rights but also as members of the Bishnoi Hindu sect for which the tree was sacred’, p. 310). He also covers the topic of ideas of solar colonialism in the 1900s in North Africa, which seems to be an idea of recent provenance.

There are several other universal themes running through the book: A peculiar strength is that he reflects upon the diversity of the different environmental movements concerning their motives and intellectual background. All in all, he charts environmental movements as a whole. Worth mentioning is also that Radkau is not afraid to discuss the roles of individuals, such as the tragic story of the Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa (P. 195) or of the ‘ocean warrior’ Paul Watson (p. 296) and bringing them the reputation that they deserve. What is the result of this may seem as a walk through the hall of fame of ecologists. His personal number one enemy is the nuclear industry and lobby, which is explained partly through experiences he had in his youth.

An additional thread running throughout the book is the danger of bureaucratization, which leads him to pithy cynicism when he writes of the ‘benefits’ of conference tourism where thousands of negotiators are travelling in a less sustainable way to negotiate about the environ-

mental future of our world. The same problem goes for tourism as well (p. 324).

At least what could be adapted? First of all: A global history always has the problem of having not the depth to include everything. This book is specialized on environmental movements and at least also on key individuals. These are the clear strengths of this monograph that should be further elaborated.

There are few historical inaccuracies like the following: â[O]f course, the cultural backgrounds should not be overlooked. The United States and Australia lacked ancient temples and Gothic cathedrals; that left only natural landmarks as national monuments.â (p. 123). Reading these pictures of Maya pyramids, the ruins of Oceanic Nan Madol, or the remains of the Anasazi come immediately to my mind and it seems too short-sighted of Radkau to make such a statement.

In general, his perspective is more centred on environmental institutions than on environmental ideas. The following is what is added to this specific problem: He deals with the organized movements but not with the opponents of environmental policy and their forethinkers. This can pose a serious problem because ignoring the opposition hampers the ability to make sense of why movements succeed or fail. It is all about showing both sides of the same coin. It is important to know why they are so effective in generating distracting science and data materials.

Another problematic view of Radkau is seen in his views of Islam towards environmentalism as he states here: âmost of the Islamic world is still today a blank on the world map of the environmental movement.â (p. 142). There are several voices who would disagree with his opinion. Please consult Mawil Izzî Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*, Cambridge 2000, or an

hour-long live interview with Calvin DeWitt and Gade, âGreen Faithâ in: Wisconsin Public Radio (NPR), âHere on Earthâ, February, 2012. http://www.wpr.net/hereonearth/archive_120229k.cfm

There could also be some clarification to the topic of hydropower if we have a look throughout the book. First he states that âOpinions about hydropower are still divided in the international ecoscene.â (p. 140). This is certainly true, but in one of his last pages he writes: âThe two main targets of attack worldwide â nuclear power plants and large dams â have moved out of the firing line because of the climate alarm; indeed, they are sometimes sold as forms of climate protectionâ (p. 430). This cannot be agreed with because there are so many recent protest movements that would not be taken seriously if we agree with Radkau's statement. Blue Planet Project, *Dam Truths. A compilation of case studies about popular struggles against dams*, 2013, URL: www.blueplanetproject.net; or Robert Goodland, *Viewpoint. The World Bank versus the World Commission on Dams*, in: *Water Alternatives* 3 (2010) 2, pp. 384-398.

In conclusion, it can be said that Radkau is a good storyteller and his intentions of writing a history for a broad audience is well documented. Considering the critical points from above the reviewer thinks that a revised second longer edition would further enhance the quality of the book as it has done in the case of nearly all big works. He states that it is widespread mistake to regard environmentalists as apocalyptists and alarmists because the main driving force is not panic and fear but intellectually mediated concern. With this prospect, it may be easier to look into the near future and the problems that surely arise; nevertheless, the question is to what extent has mankind learned from its mistakes? Radkau is adding an important puzzle piece to this learning experience, provided his book is read.

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