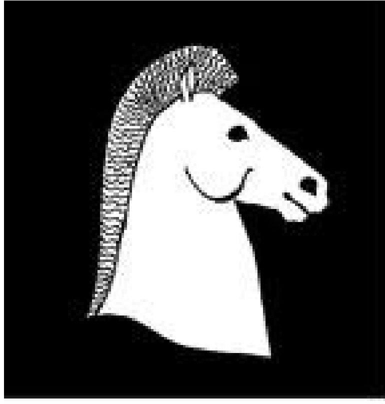

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Source: *Environment and History*, November 2014, Vol. 20, No. 4, 20th Anniversary Issue (November 2014), pp. 535-546

Published by: White Horse Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43299704

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Telling the Right Story: Environmental Violence and Liberation Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Half a century ago, *Silent Spring* showed the world how violence against living and non-living matter, by way of petrochemcial contamination, is related to violence against humans. This is a fundamental lesson of twentieth century environmental thinking, I argue, that environmental historians should carry with them into the twenty-first. The first part of the paper draws attention on the category of environmental violence. I argue that environmental degradation and social inequality have common historical roots, lying within the sphere of corporate and/or State 'development' policies, premised on the production of sacrifice zones and disposable bodies. Environmental violence, in other words, acts according to configurations of environmental injustice. In the second part, I call attention on the ways in which industrial development in post-war Europe has produced certain forms of environmental violence which have deeply affected human and non-human life in a multitude of places, and offer some insights into how this could be analysed by environmental historians.

KEYWORDS

Petrochemicals, environmental (in)justice, post-war Europe, development

1. UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL VIOLENCE

In the February of 1959, while working on the book that was to become the very manifesto of the environmental movement, the American biologist Rachel Carson wrote to her editor:

> As you know, it has always been my intention to give principal emphasis to the menace to human health, even though setting this within the general framework

Environment and History **20** (2014): 535–546.
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> of disturbances of the basic ecology of all living things. As I look over my reference material now, I am impressed by the fact that the evidence on this particular point outweighs by far, in sheer bulk and also significance, any other aspect of the problem.[1]

Published in 1962, *Silent Spring* showed an astonished public all over the world the extent to which the toxic elements of modern production had contaminated the bio-physical environment and all living organisms through the widespread use of agro-chemicals and domestic poisons, and were a true menace to human health. *Silent Spring* was centred on the analysis of industrially produced toxins and their impact on the chain of life, in which no precise boundary exists between plants, animals, water, the soil and human beings. What harms other living beings, Carson suggested, harms humans as well. A simple and intuitive principle, against which the business world, and the petro-chemical sector in particular, launched a de-legitimating campaign, based on an imputation of feminine irrationality that had presumably compromised the author's scientific objectivity.[2]

Half a century after the publication of *Silent Spring*, the significance of Carson's lesson for environmental history writing, and the Environmental Humanities in general, is livelier than ever: in his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, literary critic Rob Nixon acknowledges Carson as a major source of inspiration for understanding the 'slow violence' of environmental degradation, i.e. the long-term and often invisible effects caused by modern 'development' in its multiple aspects: industrialisation, megaprojects, mining, war, deforestation, nuclear waste and fallout, climate change.[3] Focusing on texts by activist/writers (like Carson) from the post-colonial world, Nixon sheds new light on the environmental history of the global South in the post-World War Two era.

The permanence of environmental harm and damage, exemplarily testified by the bioaccumulation in living systems of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POP), radiations or asbestos fibres, is a crucial concern for environmental historians, who have learned to trace back those flows of contaminants to their origins in the factory, the law, the laboratory and the trade agreements that regulate and organise them into what Chris Sellers and Jo Melling call global 'industrial hazard regimes'.[4] Historically originating in warfare research and technology, but given widespread diffusion by the availability of cheap oil as well as by production and consumption politics of the post-war era, petrochemicals represent the violent arm of 'development'. Associated with virtually every aspect of technological control over nature – from pharmaceuticals to fertilisers and pesticides, from plastics to gasoline – they sublimated corporate

1. Brooks 1989, p. 247
2. Hazlett 2004; Lytle 2007.
3. Nixon 2011.
4. Erker (ed.) 2014; Langston 2010; Sellers and Melling 2012.

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and State promises of universal wellbeing and liberation from illness, hunger, scarcity and toil, while the pervasiveness and persistence of their disruptive effects over living systems was long hidden or denied in public discourse. What is more important, the production and marketing of petrochemicals on a large scale became functional to specific political agendas, producing certain configurations of social relationships that would have been unthinkable in a world without petrochemicals. In short, they allowed centralised control (on the part of corporate and/or State powers) over such diverse and equally fundamental aspects of social life as farming and food consumption, housekeeping and gardening, transportation and entertainment and personal and public health. A good number of activities that used to fall within the sphere of individuals' control and know-how came to be dependent on high-tech industrial products whose real nature was difficult to grasp in its entirety and whose knowledge and regulation had to be trusted to corporate and State agencies.

From this perspective, POP contamination can be considered as a form of environmental violence, by which I mean violent acts perpetrated against non-human nature with the aim of (re)producing oppressive social relations and political control.

Empirical evidence of environmental violence appears quite frequently in the different fields of enquiry that can be grouped within the category of Environmental Humanities. Environmental historians have observed it through the multiple connections between war and environmental devastation;[5] the exercise of 'brute force technology' through all sort of megaproject developments;[6] the use of what Paul Josephson calls police coercion and military repression in order to secure unwanted infrastructures,[7] or to allow for the never-ending expansion of commodity frontiers. Political ecologists have analysed the production of 'violent environments' through social conflict, accumulation by dispossession, corporate/State recourse to violence and terror and political discourse;[8] literature scholars have looked at it through the lens of indigenous, (post)colonial, feminist and cultural minority writers, testifying to the harm done by 'development' to their land and people.[9] On different disciplinary grounds, but with a converging perspective, law scholars have come to

5. Russell 2001; Hamblin 2013.
6. Josephson 2003.
7. Armiero 2009; Armiero and Dalisa 2012.
8. Peluso and Watts 2001; Watts 2004. Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts theorise environmental violence as the effect of intersecting social relations of production and social fields of power, and categorise it as physical and symbolic, organised and disorganised, state sponsored and civic, and combinations of two or more of the above: see Peluso and Watts 2001. This approach is formulated in opposition to that of neo-Malthusian and environmental security studies, such as Thomas Homer-Dixon's *Environment, Scarcity and Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), representing violent environments as the effect of structural scarcity and overpopulation.
9. Alaimo 2010; Iovino 2012; Nixon 2011.

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theorise ecocide – i.e. the destruction or widespread contamination of habitats – as a crime against humanity.[10]

In the past few years, environmental violence has emerged clearly as a major concern for environmental and human rights activists. Human rights organisations have been documenting the increasing death toll that environmental activists are paying for opposing the new wave of plunder of natural resources of the 'developing' world in the neo-liberal era.[11] Anti-toxic-waste activists protesting against the contamination of Campania on the part of criminal as well as corporate organisations have begun to speak in terms of biocide.[12] Indigenous people have described environmental violence as 'The severe and ongoing harm caused by environmental toxics to Indigenous women, girls, unborn generations and Indigenous Peoples as a whole'.[13]

The diversity and omnipresence of environmental violence worldwide call for a scholarly effort to identify the common drivers and possible strategies of defence for vulnerable environments and populations. However, identifying one common 'enemy of nature' has been a rather elusive enterprise. Eco-socialist authors point to capitalism as a system built upon the interconnected exploitation of (and thus violence against) both human and non-human nature, seeing even the Anthropocene – which some have renamed *Capitalocene*[14] – as the ultimate global result of such violent manipulation of nature's laws.[15] Albeit correct, such analysis is limited by its inability to account for environmental violence as realised in and by the 'socialist' world, starting from the former Soviet Union and China. However we want to understand those systems, and even discounting their incomplete or subverted version of Marxism, we certainly cannot label them as capitalism. And yet, they have produced widespread environmental violence, both macroscopically visible, such as in the exsiccation of the Aral Sea or the siltation of the Yellow River, and diffuse, at the micro-level of bodily and ecosystem contamination, as in post-Chernobyl Belarus.[16]

10. Higgins 2010.
11. See Global Witness, 'Deadly Environment: the dramatic rise of killings of environmental and land defenders'. Report 2014: http://www.globalwitness.org/deadlyenvironment/
12. See http://www.globalproject.info/it/tags/stopbiocidio/community
13. See 'Indigenous Women and Environmental Violence'. A Rights-based approach addressing impacts of Environmental Contamination on Indigenous Women, Girls and Future Generations Submitted to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Expert Group Meeting 'Combatting Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls', 18–20 Jan. 2012, United Nations Headquarters, New York by Andrea Carmen, International Indian Treaty Council and Indigenous Women's Environmental and Reproductive Health Initiative; and Viola Waghiyi, Native Village of Savoonga, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska and Alaska Community Action on Toxics, Theme 2: 'Contextualizing Violence'.
14. See Jason Moore's website, World-Ecological Imaginations: Power and Production in the Web of Life: http://jasonwmoore.wordpress.com/2013/05/19/anthropocene-or-capitalocene-part-iii/
15. Williams 2010.
16. Agyeman and Ogneva-Himmelberger 2009; Shapiro 2001.

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Environmental violence does not recognise conventional divides between North and South, 'developed' and 'developing' countries, nor between the capitalist and the socialist worlds. Its effects are socially differentiated and discriminatory, but in a complex way, following the hidden patterns through which societies organise the distribution of wellbeing and social costs. In fact, environmental degradation and social inequality have common historical roots, lying within the sphere of corporate and/or State 'development' policies premised on the production of sacrifice zones and disposable bodies. Environmental violence, in other words, acts according to configurations of environmental injustice.

It is not the intent of this paper to attempt to name the *thing* that is behind the different forms of environmental violence mentioned so far. I would limit myself here to noting that probably the greatest legacy of *Silent Spring* has been that of showing how violence against living and non-living matter is related, albeit in complex and often hidden ways, to violence against humans: this is a fundamental lesson of twentieth century ecological thinking that environmental historians should carry with them into the twenty-first.

In the second part of this paper, I want to call attention on the ways in which industrial development in post-war Europe has produced certain forms of environmental violence which have deeply affected human and non-human life in a multitude of places, and offer some insights into how this could be analysed by environmental historians.

2. EUROPE, 1950s–2000s: ENVIRONMENTAL VIOLENCE AND THE QUEST FOR NARRATIVE JUSTICE.

In defining the politics of sustainability for the twenty-first century, history matters a great deal: sustainability policies that want to be socially just and politically viable must be based on new, more inclusive and convincing narratives of what we are used to labelling 'economic development', accounting for the environmental costs of both industrialisation and de-industrialisation, and their uneven social impact. Such a new narrative must include an Environmental Justice perspective.

Environmental Justice (EJ) is a unique conceptual framework for understanding how environmental costs of production and waste disposal have unevenly affected human beings along lines of social, spatial, racial, gender and generational difference.[17] Born in the United States as a sociological category originating from, and interacting with, the civil rights movement, in the last twenty years the EJ paradigm has acquired a global character, being adopted by scholars and activists in the so called global South.[18] In Europe,

17. Bullard 2000; Faber 1998; Harvey 2001; Merchant 2005.
18. Alier 2003; Carruthers 2008; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Schlosberg 2007; Westra 2008.

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EJ has made some appearance through pioneering studies focused on the continent's southern and eastern fringes, where it has proven a powerful instrument for the analysis of a number of environmental controversies in the context of their social, ethnic, cultural and politico-economic drivers.[19] In addition, the EJ framework has been fully acknowledged as policy relevant by the UK Environment Agency,[20] and indirectly by the UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) through the 1998 Aarhus Convention. While these examples demonstrate the relevance of the EJ conceptual framework to the European context, much more remains to be done in order to build a comprehensive analysis of environmental injustice, with which to be able to re-orient EU environmental policies towards a 'just sustainability' approach.

Since its early inception, the environmental history literature on modern Europe has shown how, in the course of almost three centuries of industrial activity, all sorts of poisons and radioactive materials have been buried underneath European soil and diluted in its water and atmosphere in unprecedented, unspoken and unimagined quantities,[21] affecting the environmental and human health of past and present European societies.[22]

Major concentrations of persistent organic pollutants causing carcinogenic, mutagenic and reproductive risk,[23] can be traced throughout Europe as an effect of both industrial accidents and long-term exposure. Massive industrialisation following the Second World War has implied a profound restructuring of ecosystems and human life in them, starting from the workplace itself and expanding to the industrial site, the local community and the larger environment. Asbestos, nuclear energy, coal, oil, natural gas, uranium and other mining activities, chemical industry, industrial farming and livestock-raising are all forms of production that have been responsible for substantial contamination of European territory, seriously affecting both human and non-human populations. At the same time, both industrialisation and de-industrialisation policies have created what I call the 'work/environment conflict':[24] industrial and meta-industrial, rural, informal, domestic, migrant, dismissed, worker's bodies and minds have been the primary interface between economy and environment; and too often the first victims of exposure to industrial and post-industrial hazards.

The EJ perspective points to the fact that these hazards tend to concentrate in the places where the most disenfranchised live and work, accumulating

19. Allen 2012; Agyeman and Ogneva-Himmelberger 2009; Armiero and Dalisa 2012; Armiero 2009; Harper et al. 2009.
20. Agyeman and Evans 2004; Laurent 2010.
21. Adorno and Serneri 2009; Barca 2012; Bess 2003; Cioc 2005; Henry 2012; Lekan and Zeller 2005; Luzzi 2009; Menendez-Navarro 2012; Sheail 2002; Simmons 2001; Whited et al. 2005.
22. EEA 2002, 2011, 2012.
23. Boudia and Jas 2014.
24. Barca 2012.

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in their bodies, their homes and in everything alive, sickening their children, threatening to make appearance in their unborn offspring for generations to come. Unaccounted for in mainstream history writing, and yet with a life of their own, these forgotten ecological 'things' are the dust under the rug of 'development'. In some cases of major catastrophe, such as the Vajont dam disaster (1963) or the Chernobyl nuclear explosion (1986), what is buried under the rug are human bodies (or what remains of them), together with all living beings and entire towns and villages. In other cases, like that of the asbestos tragedy, dust has been so abundantly produced and widely spread as to become – paradoxically – invisible: a commonly accepted reality of everyday life, whose material agency is only discovered after thirty or forty years of continued, apparently innocuous exposure.[25]

Mainstream narratives of European post-war development (typically emphasising economic growth, democratisation and social welfare) say very little or nothing about this kind of dust. They tend to either under-represent environmental problems or see them in a positive progressive fashion, as a declining cost of economic growth and an object of political regulation/securitisation.[26] Such narratives are based on the assumption that, to some extent, environmental (and social) costs are inevitable and even worth paying for the long-term benefit of society as a whole.[27] And yet information concerning massive environmental contamination and public health disasters is publicly available, not only from the media, but from a variety of sources: national and EU environmental protection agencies, environmental NGOs, scientific literature, people's life stories, even company archives. In its 2009 'sustainability balance', for example, the Italian ENI group mentioned 44 contaminated sites in that country alone, all referring to mining and refinery activities carried out by the group from 1953 to present. But what is hidden by the empty rhetoric of corporate sustainability and 'responsible care' programmes? What 'bare lives'[28] of places and people together lie underneath such rhetoric, asking for recognition and justice? Why are these people and places nowhere to be found in our history texts; why do they not have the place they deserve in the official memory of the European economy? It is time to draw a more inclusive cost–benefit balance of European industrial development in the post-war era – one including the true costs to human and non-human nature, to culture, to places. It is time to stop oiling the machinery of oblivion[29] and start disseminating 'resources of hope':[30] memory, recognition and justice. It is time to oppose

25. Allen and Kazan-Allen 2012; Bartrip 2001; Johnston and McIvor 2000.
26. Carreras 2006; Crouzet 2001; Hobsbawm 1995; Inglehart 1997; Judt 2005; Wasserstein 2007.
27. Barca 2011.
28. Agamben 1998.
29. Nixon 2011.
30. Williams and Gable 1989.

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the logic of 'the greater common good',[31] refusing the human sacrifice that it makes necessary, together with the sacrifice of some disposable place and its ecosystem, and to offer support to the struggle of environmentally and socially disenfranchised people, of past, present and future generations – the survivors of Vajont, the 'dismissed' of the Black Country, the children of post-Chernobyl Belarus – against memory loss and narrative violence. It is time to ask: what stories are there to be rescued? What changes need to be made?

There are two forms of narrative violence that matter to environmental justice: first is the act of silencing crucial information, hiding evidence, suppressing stories so that they do not turn into judicial enquiries, monetary compensation or pieces of legislation. This is the narrative violence perpetrated by corporate and governmental powers, often with the help of the media and of normal science, against environmental activists and the powerless communities that are usually the victims – even directly targeted as such – of some environmental crime. The act of silencing, however, presupposes that something has been spoken of. It is an open repression against voices that have somehow managed to be heard. But how to describe the simple unacknowledgment of things that – no matter how materially real for one person – have never made it to someone else's perception? This second form of narrative violence is the violence of not even looking for the things whose existence our narrative structure does not allow us to accept. This is the case with the macroscopic absence of environmental injustice from mainstream history narratives about Europe – especially about western Europe, for the former Soviet bloc enjoys a rather higher acknowledgment of environmental devastation on the part of most scholars. And yet, an incredible amount of evidence on environmental contamination and destruction, its perpetrators and its victims, can be gathered from a variety of sources, if only one cares to. Thus, the reason why historians do not look in that direction cannot be understood in scientific terms, such as a lack of evidence or of sources. Its explanation must be pre-scientific, it must lie with some profound, unspoken assumption, that orients and conditions the historian's very choice of what is to be searched. This second form of narrative violence is one that – because unacknowledged – turns against the perpetrators themselves, for it makes them blind.

The point is, however, that societies need scholars who are capable of seeing, for it is them, ultimately, that will turn individual facts and memories into collective narratives, with the power of educating future generations, giving them a sense of what needs to be changed and why. That is the reason why Environmental historians should engage with a stronger ethical commitment, a sense of what is needed in order to give European societies a better history – one capable of accounting for that huge amount of environmental devastation and related human suffering that has yet to be told, understood and accorded some justice.

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31. Roy 2002.

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In so doing, EH should interact not only with the natural sciences (and with Public Health science in particular), but also with the rest of the Humanities, with the aim of deconstructing those particular narratives, or regimes of truth, that have shaped our way of thinking about the ecological crisis, for this is the only way to liberate the cultural forces necessary to build a more sustainable future. Narratives can be powerful tools of deception but also of empowerment. Counter-hegemonic narratives have been instrumental in the construction of alternative regimes of truth, legitimisation of knowledge and, potentially, liberation – thus we should aim at uncovering those counter-narratives of resistance to environmental destruction that can be found in individual and collective memories, social movements' self-representation, fiction and non-fiction literatures and other forms of creative expression related to issues of environmental (in)justice. What is at stake is the enlargement of our ability to seize the social and cultural complexity of the current environmental crisis and, consequently, our ability to think a more inclusive and just environmental politics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Research for this article benefited from EC funding under the Marie Curie Actions - Initial Training Networks - FP7 - PEOPLE - 2011; contract No. 289374 - ENTITLE.

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