

# H-Net Reviews

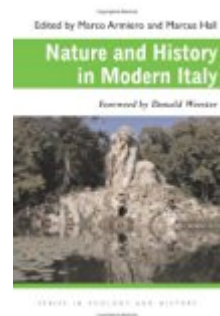
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marco Armiero, Marcus Hall, eds. *Nature and History in Modern Italy*. Ecology and History Series. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010. xvi + 295 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1915-1; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1916-8.

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*Nature and History in Modern Italy*, edited by Marco Armiero (senior researcher at the Italian National Research Council) and Marcus Hall (senior lecturer at the University of Zurich), contains fourteen environmental history essays grouped into four sections. The first section, “Foundations,” presents four contributions on the distinctive character of Italian environmental history (Piero Bevilacqua), seismic disasters (Emanuela Guidoboni), mudslides in Campania in the nineteenth century (Walter Palmieri), and environmental imperialism in Sardinia (Hall). “Commons and Forests” presents four essays on the decline of the commons in early modern Italy (Gabriella Corona), forest management (Bruno Vecchio and Roberta Cevasco), and access rights and environmental conflicts in Fascist Italy (Wilko Graf von Hardenberg). “Pollution, Industry and Urban Environment” presents three chapters on industrial pollution in Italy (Simone Neri Serneri), environmental problems caused by petrochemical plants in Sicily (Salvatore Adorno), and the Seveso disaster (Laura Centemeri). The final section, “Landscape, Culture and Environmentalism,” presents three essays on the management of water resources (Stefania Barca), management of mountains (Armiero), and environmental movements (Luigi Piccioni).

The issues presented are well known in Italy, both because the authors represent the core of a few Italian specialists dealing with environmental history, and because the fourteen chapters summarize (or update) research already published in Italian. I imagine, then, that the editors’ intent was to present this research to an international audience who does not read Italian. Such intent is undoubtedly commendable since research published

in Italian reaches a very small number of scholars and, often, finds no place even in bibliographies. The reader who is not acquainted with the history of Italy and the environmental problems of the *bel paese* will find in this volume a rich compendium of the interactions between nature and men in the homeland of Dante Alighieri and Benito Mussolini.

I can only agree with Donald Worster, the author of the foreword, when he writes that *Nature and History in Modern Italy* “demonstrates that traditional history, the study of politics and social conflict, must now be rewritten to show that environmental issues have become a significant cause of struggle among social groups. Some of those groups have long led lives of invisibility and exploitation” (p. xiii). The dominant view found in the book is a sort of “*sustainable anthropocentrism*: a policy that assumes the centrality of nature in the process of transforming real life, but which does not forget the role of the human eye in every scientific operation and, most importantly, in historical reconstruction,” to use a phrase from Bevilacqua’s earlier work.[1]

Among the fourteen essays, those deserving special mention are Hall’s “Environmental Imperialism in Sardinia,” Adorno’s “Petrochemical Modernity in Sicily,” and Centemeri’s “The Seveso Disaster Legacy” because they present to an international audience subjects rarely addressed by Italian historiography or not yet translated into English. Hall investigates the relationship between the Rockefeller Foundation’s International Health Division, the presence of malaria in Sardinia, and the use of DDT, concluding that “we can realize that DDT did (and does) help control malaria around the world, thereby

saves lives. But we can also conclude that the Rockefeller Foundation did submit Sardinians and their environment to DDT levels that were much higher than was necessary for extinguishing malaria.... One must also wonder why other islands lying closer to foundation headquarters, such as Long Island, were not chosen as the experimental site for eradicating a native mosquito" (p. 84). Adorno examines an important case study on the industrialization of Italy in the late twentieth century: that of the southeastern coast between Augusta and Syracuse, where petrochemical plants owned by Esso Montedison, and other companies, were installed and spread across some 2,700 hectares of coastal Sicily. Adorno analyzes the debate about the effects of air and water pollution by paying particular attention to epidemiological investigations about the relationship between strong mercury contamination and heavy hydrocarbons and the insurgence of cancer and birth defects. Centemeri examines an accident that occurred on July 10, 1976, in a ICMESA (Industrie Chimiche Meda Società Azionaria) chemical plant and the resulting dioxin crisis in Seveso, a town of twenty thousand inhabitants located north of Milan. In particular, Centemeri analyzes the rival interpretations of the dioxin crisis and the process of memory building which the author regards as controversial, arguing that "one of the main problems that the Seveso disaster made collectively obvious is that health and environmental damages stemming from chemical plants in Brianza have never been adequately addressed or compensated, politically or symbolically" (p. 207).

A reflection on the distinctive features of Italian environmental history are the focus of the editors' introduction and the opening chapter by Bevilacqua which reviews the central themes of Italian environmental history: land reclamation, habitat modification, and deforestation; rivers, sea, and water; industrial pollution; and urban areas. Precisely the last two topics have been the central themes of Italian historical-environmental research in the twenty-first century,[2] and although industrial pollution is well represented here by the essays of Adorno, Centemeri, and Neri Serneri, urban history is inexplicably left out. Yet, in the twenty-first century,

urban environmental history has given a significant contribution to the renewal of Italian environmental history. Similarly, the section "Landscape, Culture, and Environmentalism" should have been completed by a chapter devoted to environmentalism in the second half of the twentieth century. If the story of the birth of the environmental movement is undoubtedly of great interest, Italian environmentalism has assumed a social and political relevance only in the course of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s when it adopted a new model that was very attentive to grassroots participation and social justice issues and that often took the form of an egoistic environmentalism akin to demagogic and neopopulist political action (an important topic still awaiting investigation). Thus this is not an exhaustive compendium, since its time limit is chiefly the first half of the twentieth century and it omits some of the recent published research on relevant topics, such as the relationship between environmental problems and healthcare. The editors have preferred to include contributions by well-known authors—an understandable choice—but that may have contributed to reducing the number of voices within Italian environmental history by leaving newer research out. *Nature and History in Modern Italy* represents an interesting overview on the interaction between history and environment in Italy, but it is as fair to say that Italian environmental history today goes beyond the scope of these authors and the topics they present in this volume.

#### Notes

[1]. Piero Bevilacqua, *Demetra e Clio: Uomini e ambiente nella storia* (Rome: Donzelli, 2001), viii.

[2]. See Simone Neri Serneri, *Incorporare la natura: Storie ambientali del Novecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2005); Gabriella Corona, *I ragazzi del piano: Napoli e le ragioni dell'ambientalismo urbano* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007); Gabriella Corona and Simone Neri Serneri, *Storia e ambiente: Città, risorse e territori nell'Italia contemporanea* (Rome: Carocci, 2007); and Salvatore Adorno and Simone Neri Serneri, *Industria, ambiente e territorio: Per una storia ambientale delle aree industriali in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).

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