

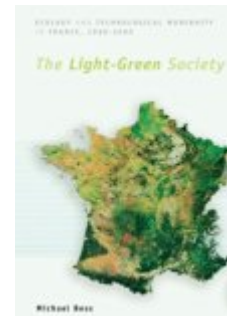
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Bess. *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 369 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-04417-0; \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-04418-7.

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This book includes forty-three pages of footnotes, an exhaustive list of printed sources, a huge bibliography divided into an environmental section and a general section, and a very useful index of terms, notions, authors, and persons quoted within the text. The body is divided into four parts, sixteen chapters, and several figures, mainly advertisements and posters.

The purpose of the book is to give a historical perspective on environmentalism in France in the postwar period. According to the author, the French society has seen a “gradual commingling, over several decades, of these two antagonistic ideological currents—the greens and the technological enthusiasts—to produce something new: the partial greening of the mainstream, in which neither side emerged wholly satisfied, not utterly dismayed, but in which a whole new complex of discourses and institutions nonetheless came into being” (p. 4). The first half of the book focuses on how these transformations occur, parts 1 and 2 being respectively dedicated to technological and environmental features. The second half explains how these features cohabit (part 3) and how they may predictably change (part 4).

The first chapter is centered on technological modernization, its pieces of evidence, trends, and explanations. France does not have a positive image in the world of green activists because it bears, since the early postwar period, a sustained consensus on technology, a “passionate love affair with large-scale, high profile technology in general, and with nuclear technology in particular” (p. 14). This feeling finds a concrete translation in the postwar industrial and economical boom, and a relevant explanation in the emotional shock of World War II that crystallized a fear of domination and deep self-

doubt: “Fear of being dominated from abroad, however, constituted only half of the ‘discourse of anxiety.’ The other component consisted of profound self-doubt, the conviction that French society itself was ailing, like a tree rotting from the core outwards” (p. 20). The author analyzes this tremendous “technological darwinism” with the help of different examples, such as the Condorde, nuclear technology, and the Rainbow Warrior Affair.

The second chapter looks at the rural world and its “endangered species,” the peasants. The massive “rural exodus” that followed the end of World War II has translated into deep social and economical transformations, and moreover a deep feeling of wound and spiritual loss for the French population. The context of technological rise is therefore “inseparable from the wrenching changes that overran this picturesque landscape during the *trente glorieuses*” (p. 40). Supported by the whole population, the resistance of the French peasantry leads to original reactions, different from the “back to nature” that swept most of the industrialized world (p. 48).

In chapter 3, the author looks for a common definition of “environmentalism,” given differences between the English term “environmentalist” and the French term “cologiste”. Looking back at evolutions of ecology taking place between the middle of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century, the author stresses a transition from “acclimatization” to “preservation,” from a utilitarian conception of natural resources to a more aesthetic vision, from an anthropocentric approach to an ecocentric approach. By the mid-1950s, a modern environmentalism was born which can be defined as:

“a new vision of the human place within nature, a cultural transformation of nearly Copernician proportions:

from a world perceived as infinite in its resources, a world for humans to master and put to use without restriction, to a world perceived as finite in both its resources and its resilience, a fragile world requiring from humankind a newfound mentality of self-restraint and even of active protectiveness” (p. 61).

Finitude, interconnectedness, systemic rupture, and global socioeconomic transformation are the four main implicit ideas of such a conception of environment.

Chapter 4 explores the success of the environmental cause during the following two decades. The author objects to a frequent “dead fish explanation,” interpreting such success as a consequence of economic boom on public opinion. Instead, he underlines changes in the subjectivity and the perception of the French population regarding problems of pollution affecting environment, according to three types of factors: a tension between technology and tradition, modernity and history, the lure of consumer society and the fear of losing national specificity; new forms of green activism; and the emergence of a counterculture during the 1960s, as a consequence of the revolt of May 1968. Referring to Ronald Inglehart’s works on European social changes, environmentalism reflects the transition from a “materialist” (comfort, job security, and so forth) to a “post-materialist” (quality of life, leisure time, fulfilment) set of values. The expansion of green parties throughout 1980s and 1990s is the political side of this deep social transition.

Chapter 5 aims at characterizing French green thoughts and their numerous nuances. On the one side, “nature centered environmentalists” like Robert Hainard, Philippe Lebreton, and Antoine Waechter claim that industrialization threatens the biosphere. On the other side, “social environmentalists” like Andr Gorz, Ivan Illich, and Jacques Ellul point out what links nature to human poverty, social inequality, and violence. Inside this “social environmentalism,” four main streams may be distinguished according to their focus on different issues such as the critique of productivism, global economic disparities, the commitment to balance urban and rural worlds, or the building of a French political pole. After analyzing these streams, the author disputes a vision of “Deep Ecology,” considering ecology as deeply reactionary (antihumanists, authoritarianists, facists and antimodernists). In the case of French political parties, instead he stresses their positive and integrative conception of the human place within nature, the moderation of goals and methods, a frequent anti-authoritarianism, and a critical embrace of modernity.

Chapter 6 is pure fiction, with the purpose of giving an example of what the French society could be in a not-too-distant future, according to the continuous greening of the social order. It is largely based on the 1999 electoral platform for Les Verts, as well as interviews with French political leaders. The author presents the results as “a greatly compressed and simplified microcosm of green ideas projected onto a manageable narrative scale: the result is, unavoidably, a stylized and impressionistic account, designed to capture the ‘feel’ of a certain constellation of philosophical values in concrete embodiment” (p. 142).

Chapter 7 is the first chapter in part 3. It is centered on the “dual nature of light-green” society, namely the interweaving between nature and society. On the one hand, there is a penetration of nature into society, as reflected by the TGV: “the TGV was like a ‘green Concorde’: it epitomizes the fundamental compromise at the heart of the light-green society, the pervasive overlay of environmental considerations over the Promethea, ethos of the *trente glorieuses*” (p. 162). Fastest, safest, and also economically successful, it has been barely criticized, even by environmentalists. On the other hand, there is a penetration of society into nature. In this perspective, the case of the Brittany’s Pointe du Raz Project is exemplary. As a response to the explosion of tourist numbers, a project was jointly managed by local authorities and public agencies. It consisted of a general refurbishment of the site, eliminating all traces of human presence, re-establishing vegetation, and improving access trails. The result is a seemingly natural space, but deeply controlled and organized by human activities, a duality captured by the metaphor of the cyborg.

In chapter 8, the author turns to changes in consumables and consumption. He makes an analytic distinction between “superficial change” and “profound change.” The former, like the multiplication of green labels, is of little significance and little cost. The latter, illustrated by farmers abandoning chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and adopting erosion control, seasonal cultivation cycles, watering practices, and the like, corresponds to radical shifts in practices, habits, techniques, values, and assumptions. Looking at different French “lifestyle” categories (such as body, home, transportation, leisure and culture), one may talk of a “Partial Revolution” as “the impact of environmentalism on postwar France might best be described as a gradual and disorderly movement toward revolutionary goals” (p. 175). Nevertheless, two misconceptions are still prejudicial. First, eco-friendly is often considered as not dangerous for the environment,

even though scientists have problems defining acceptable levels of emissions. Second, eco-friendly may look beneficial to the environment, whereas mass production is always harmful to nature. As a consequence, “the consumer economy continued to offer its ever-shifting, ever-expanding cornucopia of goods and services; and the ‘green turn,’ instead of replacing that economy with a slimmed-down, minimalist array of products, merely added a new theme to the plethora of choices available” (p. 188).

The purpose of chapter 9 is to show the “environmentalization of the State,” understood as a multiplication of public institutions, public actors, and public policies addressing environmental issues. After the criticisms of the 1970s about a highly centralized and rigid State, environmentalists now have to face an intricate French legal system, made up of more than one thousand specialized laws on the environment. Environmental issues are dependent upon six levels of administration; refer to a large number of bannings, prescriptions, fiscal policies and subsidies; and have been taken in charge by key actors and key laws, since the creation of the Ministry of Environment in 1971, and until the recent Treaty of Amsterdam (1997). By the early twenty-first century, “ecological constraints had come to constitute part of the very fabric of French law and public policy” (p. 208).

Chapter 10 turns to how industrialists reacted to the greening of society. Industry has adapted to social changes faster and more profoundly than the public sector, transforming the environment into a strong and cost-effective activity: “Far more than private citizens, retail stores, farmers, or local governments (where the transformation came piecemeal and slowly if at all), the factories and large-scale business enterprises of France swung round into alignment with green ideas during the 1990s, and took substantive steps to improve their environmental performance” (p. 211). Influenced by legal restrictions, public opinion, high costs of cleanup procedures (the “polluter pays” principle), and by energy-resources savings, eco-industries have developed within three main areas: pollution control (three-fourths of all expenditures, because of water treatment and waste management); nature protection (13 percent of environmental jobs); and environmental research (mainly private research). This huge development looks like a paradox since environmentalism has strengthened an ideology of growth, productivism, and environmentalism.

Chapter 11 is an evaluation of French environmental changes, regarding a common purpose for “sustainable

development.” A brief overview of public policies leads the author to underline a weak preservation of forests (due to chemical-intensive methods, erosion, sewage-treatment as fertilizers) and a lack of air pollution issues, while real steps are taken to protect endangered species. Finally, he argues, changes in French society do not cope with “Sustainable Development” for different reasons: a huge and still growing energy consumption, 92 percent coming from nonrenewable sources; a failure of policies to preserve endangered species; and a heavy production of harmful effluents, such as greenhouse gases, agricultural chemicals, or radioactive wastes. These examples show how the French “country in the early 2000s is still borrowing from the future in order to live richly in the present” (p. 232).

The third part of the book turns to a more prospective exercise, asking the question: What is “the future of nature in a Light-Green world”? In chapter 12, the author’s ambition is to extend his Light-Green analysis “throughout the democratic portions of the industrialized world.” The Light-Green social order is, at different degrees, present in all these countries because of numerous common patterns of evolution: emergence of a consumer economy, hell-bent on building homes and offices; decline of agriculture as a major sector of economy; importance of technology as an economic growth factor; and connections to global economy (pp. 238-239). In France, some favorable conditions (scientific establishment, open public sphere, dissident counterculture, prosperous population, competitive political system, and responsive economic system) rendered the light-green society thinkable and achievable, but also singular. Nevertheless, the “underlying pattern experienced to varying degrees by the peoples of virtually all the industrial democracies during the second half of the twentieth century” led to “a new kind of social order” (p. 241). In the subsequent chapters, the author tries to evaluate the social perspectives of such patterns, and the future of what he calls a “shrinking earth.”

Chapter 13 focuses on the process of artificialization of nature by human beings, which may be defined as a disappearance of the border between what is given and what is produced, between designed and spontaneous, between artifact and creature. Due to a stronger confidence in science, this artificialization is at work within many fields of science and technology, like biotechnologies, transgenic research in agriculture, the extension of human control over the entire biosphere, or nanotechnologies. For the author, a “planetary-scale anthropization” has emerged as a result of increasing population

and technology, and a growing number of human interventions on nature.

As a consequence of this process, people have to accept and endure a mirage of wilderness, as described in chapter 14. Borrowing an example from Robert Elliot, the author explains how “restored nature does not have the same value as original nature, in exactly the same way as a superb, virtually indistinguishable copy of a Van Gogh does not have the same value as the genuine article” (p. 257). For that reason, people have to rethink the separations considered as “natural” between man and animal, plant and animal, organic and inorganic, nature and culture, etc. Two concepts may be of use for such a purpose. First, a concept of “hybridity”, referred to by authors like Bruno Latour or Michel Serres, leads to reintegrate humans constructively into their physical surroundings, and tries to conceive one’s own hybrid nature and the hybrid nature of the environment. Second, a concept of “wildness,” distinct from the absolute character of wilderness and its vanishing experience, refers to a gradation in the wild character of something.

In chapter 15, the author shows how nature and society become more and more intricately linked. On the one side, nature is penetrating society in a very subtle and unconscious manner: “You live in a civilization that increasingly conspires, in large and small ways, to reconnect you with nature....A quality of connectedness, of embeddedness in the biosphere, that your culture has gradually begun to incorporate. This is the direction in which the light-green society is taking us” (p. 276). On the other side, one may hardly resist to the penetration of nature by society: “even with the most responsible attitude, even with the most ecologically sophisticated attitude practices of territorial management, we cannot stop the wildness from slowly leaching out of our world. If we want to be truly effective in braking the process of artificialization, we will have to try something else” (p. 282).

Acknowledging the increasing intricacy of the link between humans and nature, the author raises prospective issues in chapter 16. In particular, he turns to the recent spatial discoveries and technological progresses to give a different view on the relation of humans with nature and wilderness. “Might it someday be possible for outer space to function in human culture as an extension of the terrestrial wilderness” (p. 286)? Wondering if we will reproduce our mistakes, he analyzes visions of space in literature. This makes him rather optimistic as such visions often present space as a pivotal strategic arena,

but also a common heritage of humankind.

To conclude, the author recalls the main tendencies of the “managed earth,” and its French translation: “the structural implications of the light-green society remain unforgiving: the planetary ratio between the wild and the tame continues unavoidably to tilt toward the latter” (p. 293). In other words the planet will become considerably tame, in France faster than elsewhere: “with its territory embodying the relatively tame end of the spectrum of natura-artificial hybrids—a country with few surviving wilderness and a great variety of partially humanized paysage—may turn out closer to the shape of things to come” (p. 294). In order to live in harmony in “a Planet of Paysage,” the author recommends the defense of wilder spaces (inevitably losing a great deal of their wildness), an appreciation of wildness where it exists, and a practice of collective eco-restraint.

From a general point of view, the book is pleasant reading, thanks to a seductive style, clear explanations, well-defined terms, and a rigorous articulation. It also contains pervasive and scholarly perspectives on environmentalism and ecology, which may be of great help in deconstructing the “givenness” of some recurrent aspects of technological and environmental modernity. In this sense, the study of the past is, once more, a very effective and heuristic tool to study the present. Nevertheless, the construction of the demonstration raises different issues that one could sum up under the general term of sampling. In this book, the question of sampling is central for different reasons and at different levels, both internal and external levels.

At an internal level, one may question the examples chosen in parts 1 and 2, often referring to a common and general knowledge on French contemporary history. The sequence of the Concorde, nuclear energy, and nuclear tests examples forms, at long last, a list of clichés, which sometimes is not fully convincing. Moreover, description and analysis of these events often deliver a general and consensual interpretation rather than a deeper and problematic view of each period, opposing conflictual visions and interests. At the end of part 2, the reader may think that even if these examples are of media importance, their sociological significance has still to be proved. This leads us to a fundamental issue: the choice by the author to use a history of events—a “top-down history”—to analyze deep social transformations. Such an issue may be addressed at different times in the book, with the help of a simple question: how can one speak of “French” in general? In other words, what exactly are the “French

opinion,” the “French society,” the “French mentality,” or the “French imagination” that the author is trying to capture, through different examples, at different periods of time? The question may be raised at some crucial stages of the demonstration, as in the analysis of the Concorde experience: “But above all, the Concorde gave the French a potent psychological boost, making them feel that they, too, when they applied themselves, could earn a place within modernity’s inner circle of winners” (pp. 27-28). To a certain extent, the answer to our question lies in the use of different instruments that are worth being discussed.

The polls are an important indicator dedicated to capturing the French opinion, namely a growing support of French technological policies, be it during the Rainbow Warrior Affair or about the Concorde’s development program. For many reasons, the interpretation of such polls is not as simple as it looks. Taking into account the political context or the structure of the questionnaire could lead one analyst to interpret results far differently than another, for example as a political support for government rather than a symptom of “technological Darwinism.” An external critique of the polls (mainly produced in this case by one agency, the SOFRES, and often published by *Le Figaro*, a well-known right-wing newspaper) would have been useful at this stage. In addition, the use of such polls leaves a substantial part of the population—at least one third—in an unexplained position regarding the Light-Green trend.

Another instrument, that reinforces the stereotypic impression, is the very singular use of literary and cinema arguments to characterize a French dominant cultural aspect. Antoine de Saint-Exupery helps to understand the French infatuation with the Concorde program, because he captures “the French popular imagination in the 1930s with his books *Terre des hommes* and *Vol de nuit*... Human hands controlling a magnificent machine: to fly, and to do it well, with style” (p. 24). Later, the film *Le Cheval Vapeur* (by Maurice Failevic) is analyzed to prove that the farm tractor has had a greater impact on French society than the Concorde or nuclear tests. In addition, the dramatic style sometimes used by the author himself tends to erase the limit between story and history, between narration and analysis, between realism and reality (see for instance the description of the Rainbow Warrior Affair, [pp. 34-35]).

At the end, the choice of examples, as much as the interpretation of them, give a stereotypical impression of French society, which, at times, suffers from a lack of complexity. Conflicts about EDF (Electricite de France) policies and nuclear power-plants implementations, divisions inside political parties about different options, competitions between administrations for technological options are barely mentioned, and never analyzed. At least the author points out, on one occasion, the splitting between the French citizens and technocrats’ choices:

“because of the highly centralized and top-heavy structure of the French state, a relatively small group of technocrats and politicians effectively made a choice for all of France, steering the nation resolutely onto the nuclear road, with consequences that would decisively affect the population and the territory for at least a century to come” (p. 95). Such a statement strongly qualifies the research of a “French position” when dealing with technological modernity. At an external level, one may wonder what makes France a typical example of the emergence of a Light-Green social order. The intricate links between technology and environment can be, for numerous reasons, extended to other European countries. The author gives, after studying the French case, a long list of factors placing European countries, and “virtually all the industrial democracies” (p. 241), in a very similar path of development: the consumer economy, the decline of agriculture, technology as a core growth factor, connections to global economy, the proliferation of transportation and communication technologies, etc. (pp. 238-239). But France holds several distinctive features (a late industrialization, the defeat during WWII, the role of State apparatus, and an attachment to the peasant’s world) that make it an emblematic case of the Light-Green social order. Nevertheless, the processes and causal chains linking these elements remain unclear, and one may still wonder if these particular features, at the center of the book, are not engulfed by more general patterns affecting western civilization. In such circumstances, the demonstration would be simultaneously more convincing and more relevant if it focused on these influences (how global economy formats technological infatuation, and how transportation and communication models orient environmental interests and policies), and the standardizations they produce. For this kind of perspective, a comparative study would probably be of great help.

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