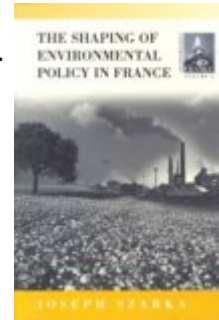


**Joseph Szarka.** *The Shaping of Environmental Policy in France (Contemporary France).* New York: Berghahn Books, 2002. x + 250 pp. \$22.50, paper, ISBN 978-1-57181-495-1.



**Reviewed by** Mathieu Flonneau

**Published on** H-Environment (September, 2003)

About the Difficulty of Formulating a Public Policy Following Citizen's Expectations

One of the main conclusions the reader of the book, *The Shaping of Environmental Policy in France*, can draw is that the best specialists of French contemporary political movements come from the Anglo-Saxon academic world. After Stanley Hoffmann, who conceptualised the evolution of the French social and political forces at the beginning of the sixties, Joseph Szarka's book offers a deep analysis of the environmental field in France, from the late 1970s through the 1990s.[1] This focus, far from being narrow-minded and only addressing ecological issues, gives a good mirror into the whole French society. Undoubtedly, such an outside evaluation highlights a complex area of knowledge, but one already well known thanks to another British researcher, Brendan Prendiville, mentioned in the rich bibliography of more than seven hundred titles.

The author attempts an explanation of the ceaseless reordering of institutional capacity and style, towards new expectations of civil society concerning the management and the protection of

the natural environment. Two stages give rhythm to the study. At first, in an almost exhaustive way, actors and shaping factors are drawn up in Part One. Public opinion, the balance of political parties and institutional answers are gradually described. At last, the influences of the new and developing European level are presented. Then, Szarka distinguishes clearly in Part Two several case studies related to water, air and nature policies. The final question reads, how does this all work in the general perspective of "Sustainable Development?"

The invention of the environmental theme and the creation of the so called "Ministry of the impossible," as named by its first holder Robert Poujade in his memoirs, should have been more developed. I recommend that the reader consult some new, French research, for instance Florent Charvolin's dissertation[2] and my articles on the issue.[3]

The book gives evidence and convincing clues that environment management presents a privileged observatory of the contradictions, conservatism and corporatism of the French political

community. Indeed, almost every minister pointed out the difficulties of a charge which consists of, beyond being a fine speaker, trying to solve "the environmental policy equation" and to exist as a specific actor among other strong institutional cultures such as "Ministère de l'Équipement" or "Ministère de l'Agriculture." Building the environmental policy with substantial and cohesive actions is still a challenge.

Thanks to a critical analysis of the revenues founding the ADEME (Agence de l'environnement et de la maîtrise de l'énergie), many paradoxes of the philosophy of the overall state income policy may be understood. All these difficulties could appear very typically French—especially the taste for multiplied abbreviations—but the reader is seduced by the skill with which the author plays with French concepts: "colbertisme," "jacobinisme," "intérêt général," "Etat régalien" and last, but not least, "administration de mission." Even the fashionable ideal of "governance," imported from the United States and the United Kingdom, is presented with tact.

The book shows how many various groups, sometimes involved in the associative movement forming a "green diaspora," have structured public opinion. The enigma of "peripheral power," to use Pierre Grémion's words (1976), is fully explained. Factually speaking, Joseph Szarka gives many useful tables regarding the results obtained by political ecologists in European, regional and presidential elections as well as, among others, the budget of the ministry.

To conclude, I could add that Szarka's arguments are relevant even in the perspective of immediate history. Due to the weakness of the domestic political cleavages between right and left, environment headlines are shaped now by international events, such as the Rio conference, and Brussel's influences and directives. The author presents this development as a signal of the emergence of a new paradigm in hexagonal policy. A proof of this (r)evolution could be found in the be-

havior of French President Jacques Chirac using the green theme frequently as an additional moral trump. Consequently, most of the time, both sides of the political stage abuse the illusion of another way of leaving. The failure of a recent "blue party" of the right to tackle environmental issues and the infantile divisions of the green traditional forces diminish the idealistic value of ecology. This book allows the reader to judge sceptically and equivocally the concrete results or lack of results of the plural left.

Notes:

[1]. Stanley Hoffman, « Paradoxes de la communauté politique française », in *A la recherche de la France*, Paris, Seuil, 1963, 460 p.

[2]. Florian Charvolin. "L'invention de l'environnement en France (1960-1971). Les pratiques documentaires d'agrégation à l'origine du ministère de la Protection de la Nature et de l'Environnement," Ph.D. of socio-economy and political sciences, University Pierre Mendès France, Grenoble, and Ecole nationale supérieure des Mines de Paris, 1993, 503 p. One article sums up the main ideas : "L'invention du domaine de l'environnement au tournant de l'année 1970 en France", *Strates*, n° 9, 1996-1997, pp. 184-196. Also refer to Pierre Lascoumes (dir.), *Instituer l'environnement. Vingt-cinq ans d'administration de l'environnement*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999, 233 p.

[3]. Claire Andrieu et alii, *Associations et champ politique*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2001, 723 p. ; Christoph Bernhart et Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, *Le Démon moderne. La pollution dans les sociétés urbaines et industrielles d'Europe / The Modern Demon. Pollution in Urban and Industrial European Societies*, Clermont-Ferrand, Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2002, 468 p., pp. 109-125 ; *L'homme et l'environnement : quelle histoire ?*, Nantes, Pleins Feux, 2002.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and

reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Mathieu Flonneau. Review of Szarka, Joseph. *The Shaping of Environmental Policy in France (Contemporary France)*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8156>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.