

BOOK REVIEW

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The Environment between Struggles and Heritage

Abstract: *The review presents the edited volume “L’environnement entre luttes et patrimoine”. This book explores the complex and often conflicting relationship between environmental struggles and heritage-making practices. Bringing together case studies from diverse geographic and cultural contexts, the book examines how environmental issues become sites of contestation, negotiation, and identity formation. It highlights how communities, activists, and institutions navigate the tensions between ecological preservation, cultural values, and political claims, offering a multidisciplinary perspective on the environment as both a field of conflict and a bearer of collective memory.*

Keywords: *environmental studies; heritage-making practices; cultural contexts; multidisciplinary perspectives.*



Antoine Heemeryck, Pascale Phélinas (eds.) (2022). *L’environnement entre luttes et patrimoine*, Paris: L’Harmattan, ISBN-10. 2343254400, 271 p.

The volume edited by Antoine Heemeryck and Pascale Phélinas is the result of an online conference, organized in 2021, which brought together authoritative specialists dealing with environmental issues, but also with natural and cultural heritage. The two main themes, environment and heritage, as well as their interpenetration, were treated both from the perspective of new research approaches in the social sciences and through the prism of

specific case studies illustrating new social, ideological, cultural, and political trends.

In the introduction, the two editors reviewed the problematics regarding the environment and its relation to heritage throughout the last century, emphasizing the fact that the protection of the environment evolved from the status of a subject of social mobilizations to that of a “framework for redefining the social world” (p. 7). Furthermore, according to the two editors, in recent decades the environment has become an ideological, but also a social and cultural battleground, overcoming its traditional definition as a condition in which human and animal life unfolds, being seen more and more as heritage that must be preserved, protected and passed on as authentic as possible.

The issue of the patrimonialization of the environment is highlighted by several articles of the volume. Carmen Rafanell, in her study entitled, *Nature en ville et mutations urbaines: Le Parc Văcărești à Bucarest* (Nature in the city and urban changes: Văcărești Park in Bucharest), argues that gradually, after the fall of communism, Văcărești Park turned from an abandoned place into a symbol of the city on the way to becoming a sort of heritage in a logic that turns nature into an object of contemplation for the senses, a nature that also must be protected legally and patrimonially.

Environmental protection from a legal point of view becomes a social reality in the West at the end of the ‘80s, the beginning of the ‘90s. The protection of the ecosystem, the prevention of the environmental degradation, but also the support for disadvantaged communities resulted from excessive industrialization and destruction of natural habitats became important issues in Romania much later, after the accession to the European Union as a result of a genuine evolution of the citizens’ mentalities and concerns. Diana Margarit, in her study, *Sur l'échec des manifestations contre la déforestation illégale en Roumanie* (On the failure of demonstrations against illegal deforestation in Romania), stated that although the mobilization to save forests, habitats, natural and cultural heritage was constant after 2000 and coalesced important forces of civil society, it did not lead to the stopping of illegal deforestation or to a more sustained protection of the environment and the natural and cultural heritage due to the neo-liberal development policies of the post-communist Romanian state, as well as to the pecuniary interests of some corporations, and to endemic corruption.

Neo-liberal policies, which raised inequality to the rank of art, borrowed from the civil society’s vocabulary the concept of moralizing

capitalism, through the so-called social and environmental responsibility of businesses and markets. Bernard Hours in his study, *La renaissance morale d'un capitalisme naturalisé* (The moral renaissance of a naturalistic capitalism), argues that capitalist markets and corporations “have become producers of moral goods” (p. 43) while the citizen became a consumer whose political power turned into purchasing power (p. 46). According to the French researcher, in today’s globalizing world, the market wants to replace society and transform citizens from individuals with rights and obligations into people who must be protected and helped when necessary. Therefore, especially in the West, most companies have special policies to support well-being of their employee, which usually hide draconian work requirements. These policies transformed the working and living environment of employees, and as Hours stated “replaced the strike with care” (p. 48). Borrowing a concept from geography and anthropology, corporations thus aim (at least declaratively) to create an ‘ecosystem’ beneficial to all their employees. The instrumentalization of the term ecosystem by global capitalism, a term which, in its classical sense, defined a community in close connection with the environment in which it lived, is not anodyne, but ‘naturalizes’, the market economy turning it into a natural phenomenon denying its historical and cultural roots, thus creating the feeling that this type of functioning of the economy and markets is a natural given that should not be changed, but preserved and passed on (pp. 49-50).

In this context, of neo-liberal moralization (ideologization), when everything becomes a commodity and the virtual citizen becomes indignant on social networks, human connections are lost in the fog of the Internet. Monique Selim in her study, *Luttes idéologiques et normes morales* (Ideological struggles and moral norms), highlights the fact that the excessive moralization of all social aspects actually hides an increased immorality of some, especially corporations and the rich who control them. “The euphoric therapeutic society, in a posture of permanent preoccupation vigilance” is something to be praised if it did not in fact hide the growth of inequalities and the super-enrichment of the already rich (p. 61). This excessive moralization creates important cleavages in society, an example in this regard, to which the researcher draws attention, is that of the moralization of sexuality, which divides society between predators and victims. Many times, predators are considered foreigners, thus deepening the cleavages in society. In Monique Selim’s opinion, the bipolarity, the rhetoric of the enemy, which increasingly dominates the public space (the exemplary case of France

being particularly discussed by the author) inevitably leads to the reactivation of populist and even extremist movements both on the right and the left of the political spectrum. In this context, the French researcher believes that the environment has become a prisoner of cleavage policies, the moralizing of society and the rhetoric of the co-production of knowledge by the lambda citizen. These developments, however, endanger democratic rights, scientific knowledge and ultimately the environment and sustainable development.

The term ‘sustainable development’, which appeared in the 1990s, has been increasingly associated in recent years with ‘sustainable capitalism’ and ‘sustainable growth’. Antoine Heemeryck in his study, *De la guerre froide au réchauffement climatique: développement, anti-environnementalisme et gouvernance bio-numérique* (From the Cold War to global warming: development, anti-environment and bio-numerical governance), describes the evolution of the notion of development, starting in the ‘30s, continuing with Truman’s speech from 1949, which relied on development in the fight against communist regimes, going through the challenge of this principle especially in relation to environmental protection, which gradually leads to the strategic readjustment of capitalism and its apparent moralization. However, the Covid pandemic has changed this dynamic of protecting the environment because it has been proven that the environment can be fatal for humans, therefore the idea that humans must also be protected has spread more and more. And not just protected, but transformed. This transformation, the dream of trans-humanists, however, needs a bio-political governance based on permanent surveillance and discipline (p. 38).

Disciplining and supervising businesses in relation to their attitude towards the environment has become public policy everywhere in the world today. In her study, *Les apories de la régulation environnementale: le cas du soja transgénique en Argentine* (The apories of environmental regulation: the case of genetically modified soybeans in Argentina), Pascale Phélinas argues that the environment and its protection contribute to the adoption of public policies not only protecting it, but also controlling the economy and private enterprises. Starting from the concrete case of the production of genetically modified soybeans produced in Argentina, the French researcher shows that nowadays the instruments of control and regularization are no longer only the traditional legal ones (laws, public policies), but also technological

(the creation of treatment plants, less polluting technologies, etc.) and economic ones (such as intervention on prices).

These new ways of approaching environmental problems, based on a combination of complex public policies, are the subject of the study, *La diplomatie environnementale russe en perspective* (Russian environmental diplomacy put into perspective), by Stavris Parastatov and Konstantin Pilipiliadi. Environmental policies in Russia are an integral part of Russian diplomacy which, having colossal natural resources, both renewable such as water, but also non-renewable such as coal, plays this card to create allies in the international arena. European green policies lead Russia to look for these allies in other strategic areas such as Asia, but also to diversify its offer by developing new green energy production technologies. A public policy project at the national level, entitled 'Environment', was established in 2019, its implementation leading to the increasing involvement of enterprises, the state, but also of some environmental associations in Russia, thus activating social and political activism in the direction of ecology and environmental law.

Environmental activism, as well as heritage conservation with reference to Romania, are described and analyzed by Ana Pascu in her study, *Activisme social et patrimonial en Roumanie postcommuniste* (Social and patrimonial activism in post-communist Romania). The researcher in ethnology highlights, starting from two concrete cases of some local heritage associations in Romania, the fact that the new global developments regarding environmental protection, sustainable development and conservation of natural and cultural heritage are becoming congruent, integrating more and more the notion of social activism involving especially local NGOs that implement new models of sustainable development, but also citizens in the protection, conservation and promotion of heritage.

Maria Mateoniu-Micu in her study, *Dynamiques historiques du patrimoine: de l'industrialisation au développement durable dans la Vallée du Jiu (Roumanie)* (Historical dynamics of heritage: from industrialization to sustainable development in the Jiu Valley), also highlights the importance of associations and local entrepreneurs in the valorization and promotion of industrial and cultural heritage focusing on the case study of Valea Jiului. A revealing case study for the evolution of the notion of patrimony over time, as well as of economic development and environmental protection policies in Romania. The Jiului Val-

ley exemplifies this local, national and international dynamic, beginning with the idea of heritage as a property right transferable from one holder to a successor over lands and goods (pre-industrial and industrial era of mining type) passing through the period of heritage as an economic human but also cultural resource managed by the state arbitrarily, monolithically and centralized in communism (both at the industrial and memorial level) to the recent period when the notion of heritage encompasses diverse practices and theories. In the last decades, almost everything is considered worthy of being conserved, protected, accumulated and passed on to the next generations (p. 203), the notion of heritage being more and more closely related to public policies of sustainable development and environmental protection. The only factor that is not fully aware of these public policies are the local people, the citizens of Valea Jiului, little informed about the processes of restructuring, development and patrimonialization of the region.

In Romania, citizens have always been the imperfect and mostly passive recipients of public policies, even though they were directly concerned and were heavily influenced by them, a fact highlighted by Cornel Aurelian Micu's study, *La précarité du droit de la propriété en Roumanie rurale* (On the precariousness of property rights in rural Romania). The Romanian historian convincingly demonstrates how the notion of land ownership took shape in Romania in the 19th century through a top-down process, from the ruling elites to the masses. It experienced important transformations during the communist period, when the state together with the citizens (at the rhetorical level) jointly own both the land and other goods such as factories, plants, means of production, etc. (individual property was accepted in certain cases though), while adapting, after the fall of communism, more and more to the requirements of the market economy and the circulation of people, goods and capital, a fundamental principle of the European single market and the driving force of the European Union's public policies. The latter also plays an essential role "in the process of redefining the relationship between land and people" (p. 267) in the context of a dynamic market economy in which agriculture and lands become a commodity that must circulate but which, at the same time, enjoy special protection thanks mainly to farmers and peasants who constantly put pressure on Brussels for an agricultural policy that takes into account their needs but also those of the communities in which they live.

This brief review of the topics addressed by the researchers in this volume highlights the evolution of the notions of heritage, sustainable

development, environmental protection, ecosystem, biodiversity, biopolitics over time, starting from concrete cases, and the stakes that have led to these developments, also listing the actors involved in these social, economic, cultural, etc. processes. Moreover, the primary and/or secondary factors of the changes of the last decades at the European and global level and their consequences on people, environment, but also culture and individual and collective well-being are also outlined by most of the authors. The detailed analyses and the comparative dimension make this work a referential one for Romania where these topics are not addressed in a pertinent way, lacking above all a theoretical and methodological framework in line with the new developments of scientific knowledge.