

Book Review: The Greenest Nation? A New History of German Environmentalism by Frank Uekötter

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/06/21/book-review-the-greenest-nation-a-new-history-of-german-environmentalism-by-frank-uekotter/

2014-6-21

Germany enjoys an enviably green reputation, with environmentalists in other countries applauding its strict environmental laws, its world-class green technology firms, its phase-out of nuclear power, and its influential Green Party. In **The Greenest Nation?** Frank Uekötter aims to offer an overview of the evolution of German environmentalism since the late nineteenth century. **Sebastian Mayr** recommends this to first year students seeking an overview of some of the key moments in green German history.

The Greenest Nation? A New History of German Environmentalism. Frank Uekötter. MIT Press. May 2014.

Find this book: 

In an [Environmental Rating Agency report](#) from 2012, Germany was placed top of the G20 league table with a mean rating of A+, making it stand out against its European neighbours. In *The Greenest Nation?* Frank Uekötter, reader in Environmental Humanities at the University of Birmingham, provides a comprehensive picture of German environmentalism from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Drawing on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, Uekötter envisages environmentalism as “a set of three distinct fields of activity: a field of civic activism, a field of government policy, and a field of culture and life” (p.9), and here we are encouraged to consider the many inconsistencies and caveats along the way, and understand how measures in one field can have adverse effects in another. He thus promises “A New History of German Environmentalism” by going beyond the usual teleologies of an “impending green utopia” and provides us with an overview of German environmentalism and its main forces and drivers, and with the opportunity to learn from the German experience.

Uekötter begins by describing the picture in the early 1900s and succeeds quickly in providing the reader with many interesting details of environmentalist events and stories; for example, the attempt to preserve the Laufenburg rapids – a scenic spot on the Upper Rhine between Basel and Lake Constance – against a power plant project built from 1904-1909. Looking also at particularities of German environmentalism during this time, the author includes, for example, a large number of diverse organizations, a quite proactive administration and the colourful “Life Reform” movement, which aimed at living life close to nature. The author concludes that German environmentalism did “reasonably well” in the early 1900s but did not stand out internationally.

Chapter two moves on to detail how environmentalism then entered “a time of crisis” during the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. While the Weimar constitution took into account nature conservation – ranging from founding large national parks to individual species protection – and the Nazi regime enacted a conservation law which “offered nearly everything that the movement had been demanding for decades”, the overall performance was negative. The political and socioeconomic instability of the interwar years were detrimental to advances in nature conservation, mainly on a political level, and the war economy of the Third Reich provides an interesting case study for the severe knock-on effects that foreign and economic policy can have on environmental policies and performance.

Post-war reforms in the 1950s and 1960s then followed a simple top-down approach, as Uekötter explains: “citizens



The Greenest Nation?

A New History of German Environmentalism

Frank Uekötter

saw environmental protection as a “necessity of an affluent society, bureaucrats and politicians decided to do something about it... The third field of environmentalism, culture and life, remained bleak”. Nevertheless, the environment became a serious multi-dimensional issue with the UN conference in Stockholm in 1972 leading to the creation of a multitude of institutions and programs, with German interior minister Hans-Friedrich Genscher launching the country’s first environmental program with a focus on pollution control.

According to the Uekötter, it was a series of events in combination with media coverage and the Greens having seats in parliament from 1982, which eventually proved to be the catalyzers for Germany running ahead internationally in the 1980s. The effects of forest devastation, holes in the ozone, increased public awareness of climate change, followed by the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, all contributed to Germany creating a Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. The implementation gap in national environmental policy narrowed, and sustainable agriculture and eating healthily became more important issues. Uekötter finds that civic activism, government policy, and culture and life in Germany were finally now synchronized. As a consequence, when environmentalism reunified the West and East at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, Germany served as a model. The red-green government of 1998 then introduced new reforms in the field of energy and agriculture while the EU Commission – “the new environmental pacesetter” – set the frame.



Wind turbines in Brandenburg, Germany. Credit: [Daniel Foster](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Uekötter’s book provides a comprehensive, interesting and well-referenced account of the history of German environmentalism with many illustrations of events and key actors. This Bourdieusian trichotomy is certainly a useful framework of study, even though some parts lack robust analysis. In particular, one may ask about Germany’s real and relative environmental performance. For example, it is nice to read about Germany’s vivid environmental movement in the early 1900s, but, one may ask, what about Germany’s actual and relative environmental performance back then? Furthermore, do environmentalism and environmental performance correlate? And does more environmentalism always present the better option? For example, green spaces need to be livable. At the same time, a preserved environment is not a sufficient condition for happy and prosperous lives, as work by the [new economics foundation](#) reveals. Uekötter treats such questions only partially and briefly and for one point in time at the very end of his book.

Additionally, comparisons between countries in terms of environmentalism are difficult, as goals and understandings of problems may diverge. For example, nuclear energy may not be perceived as a problem everywhere and conservationists largely ignored the ‘nuisance’ of air pollution in the early years. Nevertheless, a rough comparison can certainly be made with Germany not standing out for most of the 20th century. Using several environmental performance reports (supposedly to even out possible creators’ biases on the weighting) such as [Yale’s Environmental Performance Index](#) and pointing to the German caveats such as lignite mining, reckless automobilism, and a meat-heavy mainstream diet, he further concludes that Germany is quite a green nation today

but probably not the greenest. According to the mentioned index, Switzerland leads, followed by Luxembourg and Australia, with Germany listed as the sixth greenest nation. While this may not come as a surprise, it may strike more that German environmentalism, as Uekötter theorises, has now run out of simple problems which can be tackled within the nation state and with a quick technological fix. German environmentalism thus finds itself “in crisis”, or at least in renovation, to which the author dedicates a separate chapter. This ‘mid-passage’, as he calls it, seems plausible even though this “new history” rather trickles through than clearly emerges through the chapters.

In sum, *The Greenest Nation?* is a comprehensive and light historical review of German environmentalism, which provides interesting insights, particularly of the less known decades before the 1980s. Being published in English it fills a real gap and aims at an audience of first-year students seeking an entry point for further study on the topic. It further provides new perspectives on German environmentalism with many references and inspires to learn from the German experience through description and understanding. While the author’s conclusions remain vague on the latter and the book may lack robustness for more quantitatively and comparatively-oriented readers, it remains a valuable contribution to the existing literature as an introductory historical reading.

Sebastian Mayr is an LSE alumni of International Political Economy 2006. He is currently a teaching assistant at Science Po Paris, in the Master Programme International Energy. He is a review editor for the Journal *Frontiers in Energy Research*. [Read more reviews by Sebastian.](#)

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books