



**HAL**  
open science

**The environment of the people. Chad Montrie: The myth of  
Silent Spring. Rethinking the origins of American  
environmentalism. Berkeley: University of California Press,  
2018, 200p**

Sebastian Grevsmühl

► **To cite this version:**

Sebastian Grevsmühl. The environment of the people. Chad Montrie: The myth of Silent Spring. Rethinking the origins of American environmentalism. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018, 200p. *Metascience*, 2021, 30 (2), pp.219-222. <10.1007/s11016-021-00640-5>. <hal-03343095>

**HAL Id: hal-03343095**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03343095v1>**

Submitted on 13 Sep 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

**The environment of the people**

**University of California Press, Berkeley (Chad Montrie: *The myth of Silent Spring. Rethinking the origins of American environmentalism*) 2018, 200pp, \$24.95 PB**

Sebastian V. Grevsmühl

Centre de Recherches Historiques (CNRS-EHESS)ParisFrance

Email : [sebastian.grevsmuhl@ehess.fr](mailto:sebastian.grevsmuhl@ehess.fr)

In his latest book, *The myth of Silent Spring*, historian Chad Montrie picks up on an argument he already developed in *A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States* (Montrie 2011). In this short book, Montrie returns to the founding myth story of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962) in order to discuss in more detail the origins of American environmentalism by exploring the ways in which "working people experienced environmental problems" (5) and how they, and the labor unions for instance, addressed these problems "beginning at least as early as the 1940s" (6). Therefore, this book speaks to other recent historical developments over the last two decades that have advanced the birth of the American environmental movement well beyond the old references of the 1970s or 1962.

Conceived as a frontal attack on the "big book" (6) story of *Silent Spring*, which claims that Carson's two million copy bestseller triggered "popular ecological awareness in the US and Europe" (7), Montrie's essay is intended as a "more complicated account of what really happened" (9). Although telling the "real" story (even in part) is obviously a much too ambitious goal to achieve in 159 pages, his account "from below" nonetheless adds a valuable perspective. There is great merit in including those that are most often excluded and forgotten in standard narratives (i.e. the working class, farmers, women and black activists), most notably in taking into account "America's longer environmental transformation by industrialization" (10) from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards. Montrie thus delivers a compelling account, in particular because he pays close attention to the important fact that environmental questions are historically intimately related to various struggles for social justice.

*The Myth of Silent Spring* is organized into three main chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion) that are arranged topically and chronologically. At the beginning of each chapter Montrie highlights a specific aspect of Carson's book that deserves critical attention. He starts out with a now well-acknowledged critique many of us will be familiar with from ongoing discussions surrounding the Anthropocene. Following her introductory fable, Carson claimed that not until very recently, humankind "has acquired significant power to alter the nature of the world." (26) However, as Montrie argues, and many other historians have shown before and after him, this is not only a historically false but also a politically dangerous claim. Although nuclear weapons significantly altered the magnitude of potential, widespread environmental degradation, profound environmental transformations were by no means new to humankind. He further reminds us that the specific environmental alterations that brought about the modern American environmental movement began at least with the onset of industrialization. For instance, various types of water use and water-related infrastructures caused significant environmental disruption throughout the US, leading in many cases to local protest and social unrest. Although legislation concerning fishing, hunting and forest conservation were adopted over the course of the nineteenth century, the measures taken were mostly in favor of corporations and uses of nature by the wealthy. For the rural communities, traditional uses of key natural resources were turned into crimes: fishing and hunting became poaching and cutting down trees became timber theft. Unsurprisingly, as Montrie shows, the enforcement of these new fish and game laws "was suffused with ethnic and class conflict" (55). This is also true for the iconic national parks, such as Yosemite, that natives had made their home long ago. At first, these Native Americans were included in the park experience as an element of attraction, but by the late 1920s, their ability to effectively engage in preservation was questioned, and they were forced to move elsewhere. With a rapidly changing economy, the native rural communities, together with immigrants, increasingly provided the labor force in growing cities, and the national parks became what they were initially intended to be: romantic, scenic places with restorative potential, yet privileging from the very outset the interests of the wealthy few. These origins, Montrie argues, were conveniently erased, together with working-class environmental concerns, in order to build a standard historical account of American environmentalism born after World War II.

In chapter two—conceived as a counterpoint to the dominant place white, middle-class suburbs occupy in Carson's account—Chad Montrie addresses important pollution issues that had concerned many of the American urban areas since the nineteenth century. He is particularly interested in the social responses these issues provoked between 1870 and 1945. He thus shows how radical reformers, workers, and women living in the dirty cities fought for cleaner surroundings, including reliable garbage collection, pollution reduction from smokestacks, as well as the construction of water and sewer lines. Next to the well-known progressive reform, trade unions, anarchist, socialist and communist organizations played an important role in improving

environmental conditions in many cities, for instance in fostering environmental awareness during leisure time spent increasingly outdoors, in the countryside, in retreats, parks or forest reserves. Montrie's examples of the struggle for improving living conditions come from Toledo (Ohio), Milwaukee (Wisconsin) and Chicago (Illinois), where socialists, radical reformers and also women led initiatives that helped to improve basic sanitation services significantly. These late-nineteenth century efforts were followed by important "industrial hygiene" campaigns (80), often initiated by the same environmental activists, aiming at the improvement of working conditions, in particular the reduction of dangerous exposure to toxic substances. These early struggles for urban improvement were also accompanied by the promotion of leisure activities in parks and on lakeshores, which also brought about class and race conflict, typical of the Segregation Era. However, as Montrie convincingly shows, in developing outdoor recreation programs, radical organizations and labor unions helped foster what one may call a working people's environmental consciousness. This historical process took hold well before the Second World War and the urban need for the experience of nature only expanded during the New Deal.

The third and final chapter is about the important work community activists, labor unions and the (often migrant or black) working class carried out in favor of environmental protection throughout the Cold War. Here again, Rachel Carson's account proves to be far too monolithic and unifying, placing an abstract "man" (99) at the center of numerous environmental problems. By paying close attention to race and class, Montrie shows that environmental justice was a key topic for many unions especially during the 1960s, and they thus contributed in many ways to the making of the American environmental movement. For example, the powerful United Auto Workers (UAW) union (1.5 million members in the 1950s) lobbied for more public outdoor recreational resources. It also opposed admission fees to federal and state parks, contributed to local anti-pollution initiatives (contesting, for instance, water pollution in Detroit), and participated in Earth Day week conventions in the 1970s. Other examples come from towns where Afro-American mayors were elected and where social concerns were tightly bound to environmental concerns, as in the famous case of lead poisoning from peeling and chipped paint on walls. This and many other telling examples allow Montrie to demonstrate that local (often migrant or black) worker communities successfully fought many serious public health and environmental hazards, especially chemical pollution and hazardous waste. In all of these important cases, the mainstream environmental organizations (such as the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund etc.) did not play any role, proving once more that environmental justice is a significant blind spot for traditional accounts of the American environmental movement.

Overall, Montrie's essay is convincing. To be sure, small factual errors could have been easily avoided, such as describing *Silent Spring* as Carson's third book (26) even though, by that time, she had already published her famous sea trilogy. Non-American readers might question the fact that the "big book" story is still relevant today. This is partly because Carson had less influence on European historiography but also because within the European context, many issues raised in Montrie's essay have a longstanding tradition. Today, Carson's "big book" story is thus by no means ubiquitous. After all, environmental history has come a very long way since in 1993 Kirkpatrick Sale opened his history of the birth of the American environmental movement (*The Green Revolution*, a book Montrie does not cite at all) with the bold claim that with *Silent Spring* "the modern environmental movement began" (Sale 1993, p.3). Readers who know Montrie's work well will not necessarily find many new ideas here, but for the rest, *The Myth of Silent Spring* is a concise and valuable contribution, proving that labor history can make important contributions to environmental history.

## References

- Carson, Rachel. 1962. *Silent spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.  
Montrie, Chad. 2011. *A people's history of environmentalism in the United States*. London: Bloomsbury.  
Sale, Kirkpatrick. 1993. *The green revolution*. New York: Macmillan.