

CIERA Final Conference

*The circulation and renewal of knowledge about nature
and the environment in France and Germany*

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'A Textbook dedicated to the Environmental Humanities'

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Routledge Environmental
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Rethinking Nature

Challenging disciplinary boundaries

Edited by Aurélie Choné, Isabelle Hajek and Philippe Hamman



Featured book: A. Choné, I. Hajek and P. Hamman (eds),
Rethinking Nature. Challenging Disciplinary Boundaries, Routledge, 2017.

- Our presentation will be organized around **3 main points**:
 - We will recapitulate the scientific context and our initial assumptions.
 - Explain the main content and results of our Textbook
 - Propose a reflexive commentary on our key strengths and on possible future developments.

1. From the *Guide des Humanités environnementales* to a transatlantic dialogue. Context & assumptions

- Originally, a **research grant**: the project 'Production of knowledge about nature: cross-cutting perspectives across the humanities, social science, literary and cultural studies', funded by the Maison Interuniversitaire des Sciences de l'Homme - Alsace (2013-2016)
- A collective work extending our MISHA project: ***Guide des Humanités environnementales***, Septentrion, 2016.
 - 53 chapters / 49 contributors / 632 p.
 - Two main parts: thinking about nature and living with nature



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(dir.)

Guide des Humanités environnementales



→ The book has developed out of a **double insight**:

1. Western societies have been founded on a 'nature'/'culture' divide: gaining 'mastery over nature' as a recurring preoccupation.

2. This distinction is now under threat, because of two series of factors:

- **A growing anthropization/artificialization of nature,** the '**Anthropocene**' = the biosphere has been shaped by human action and is now endangered.
- A new '**ecology of relations**' → to grasp the plurality of the relationships linking human beings, animals, plants (P. Descola).

→ Hence a **double hypothesis** :

- The Environmental Humanities offer a way to grasp the hitherto overlooked complexity of our relationships to nature, by breaking down the borders between different disciplines.
- The idea of nature, far from undergoing a crisis, is now redefining academic disciplines and producing new fields of inquiry and new practices.

- **Our aim:** We build upon the polysemy of the idea of nature, as it was developed in Western cultural histories of modernity throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, while extending in the Textbook the scope of our analysis to **a transatlantic dialogue**.
- **Why a Textbook?** Like the *Guide*, the Textbook allows students and scholars to find their way through the great amount of studies about nature. It is designed to be convenient, clear, with 21 short chapters.
- It takes into account certain shortcomings of the *Guide*: It is difficult to separate concepts & images/metaphors, representations & actions.
- Hence a more elaborate **structure: 5 parts** instead of 2:
 - Part I – Values and actions
 - Part II – Writings and representations
 - Part III – Movements, activism and societies
 - Part IV – Renewed ecologies
 - Part V – Human–animal

II. Questioning the meaning of the « Environmental Humanities »

→ At the beginning of the 2010s, the ‘**environmental humanities**’ have emerged through the creation of specialized journals and websites:

- Mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world: *Resilience. A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, founded in 2012 in the US, *Environmental Humanities*, created by scholars from Canada, Australia, the US and Sweden.
- And more recently in Europe (Germany, France).

Their common aim: initiating a dialogue between literary and cultural studies, the humanities and social sciences.

- Main guideline = to consider **the processes of circulation at stake**, in two ways:
- The types of knowledge produced about nature, their transfer and circulation within and across disciplines is studied in relation to the **representations and uses of nature**. By combining the theoretical and empirical aspects of the topic, our aim is to reflect on the way knowledge is **inextricably linked to actual cases**.
 - Besides, our investigation is led on **an international scale**, in order to highlight the diversity of scientific outlooks, which are informed by cultural aspects. Case studies connect national cases with international debates, covering different countries and regions especially in a **transatlantic dialogue**.

The impact of the environmental humanities on traditional academic disciplines

1) Academic reconfigurations...

Well-established disciplines have been integrating environmental preoccupations/ issues and created new **specialized topics**: *environmental ethics, ecosophy, ecopsychology, ecocriticism, ecosociology, animal history*

These specialized subjects require **an interdisciplinary type of research** (ex.: animal history implies work with ethologists; ecocriticism with philosophers, feminist and cultural studies scholars....) which **bolsters and refines the disciplinary approach chosen 'at the start'**.

2) The emergence of **transdisciplinary fields**

On a second level, **new fields of study** have been emerging, mostly shaped by or in relation to categories used by civilian society, social movements or public policies.

Ex: sustainability studies, ecofeminism, political ecology, urban ecology, ecospirituality, animal studies, etc.

These are **transdisciplinary fields**, both linked to the rise of new questionings and to the development of social movements.

= Those two processes, reconfigurations within or across disciplines, are neither consecutive nor exclusive one to the other, and thus cannot be studied apart.

HE raise 3 key issues :

- **Going beyond the opposition reflection/action :** ecofeminism, ecocriticism, political ecology or ecosophy are also political movements or projects, informed by ethical preoccupations;
- **Going beyond the subject/object divide,** which also translates into a series of other binary oppositions : nature / culture, man / animal;
- **Going beyond eurocentrism :** The idea of nature is specifically European.

III. Main results & contributions. Reflexive insights and suggestions for better-informed action

This volume contains a few limitations/flaws, in particular: it doesn't mention the natural sciences, and adopts an analytical method inherited from Western academic culture.

Yet, we wish to underline some of its unquestionable contributions:

- ✓ On a few selected topics, the volume offers comparative analyses combining theoretical and empirical approaches, local and international scales, from a multicultural perspective.
- ✓ The book throws light on the ongoing ecologization of knowledge, exemplified in the emergence of the EH, with a resulting dissolution of the strict boundaries between disciplines.

More significantly, the contributors evidence two connected dynamics at the heart of the renewal of studies on nature:
reflexive / action-oriented:

✓ *A reflexive dynamic*

- Rethinking the concept of nature requires establishing stronger links between human and non-human beings living together.
- Which leads to move from the study of nature to the consideration of different ways of living together, whether this is taken to refer to biodiversity or cultural diversity.

✓ *An action-oriented dynamic*

These fields of inquiry are related to action, are directed towards intervention: they are a form of 'engagement in the world' and lead to the invention of new ways of living together and of modifying our relationship to nature. This new relationship to nature also entails a new relationship of man to himself and to his inner nature.

This open approach to the EH raises a series of new issues which would require thorough analysis: the issue of posthumanism, of a new materialism, or questions about the nature of the data used.

But, to conclude, we feel that what is most needed is to free the EH from the confines of the academic arena.

A. Choné, I. Hajek and P.
Hamman (eds), *Rethinking
Nature. Challenging
Disciplinary Boundaries*,
Routledge, 2017.

Thank you for your
attention!

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