

François Jarrige and Thomas Le Roux

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The Contamination of the Earth: A History of Pollutions in the Industrial Age

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Jarridge and Le Roux's very interesting book reveals new layers of human greed, cruelty, and stupidity when it comes to economic development and ecological destruction. This book, although it purposefully takes a global, somewhat non-Eurocentric view on the history of pollutants, is French from tip to toe and presents a unique Francophonic view of the Anthropocene.

The authors take the reader meticulously through various stages of human contamination, with particular stress on chemicals and their "pollutions." After the short history of the pollutions of the *Ancient Régime*, the reader is presented a detailed and original series of chapters which focus on the French Enlightenment and its direct consequences for science and liberal economic growth and especially the subsequent ecological disasters. Although the authors aim to present a global story with various dramatic scenes from Latin America, India, and parts of the Anglosaxon world, the French sections of the eighteenth and nineteenth century chapters are of the most value because they describe France's industrialization, chemicalization, and ecocide. Sadly, this perspective has been often missing from similar works authored by native English speakers, who too often take English speaking countries and works as the basis for their evaluations.

When it comes to eighteenth and nineteenth century France, the authors describe with particular attention the interconnectedness of the political and economic elite. There they place the scientist as one of the key figures, enablers and agents of ecological destruction, pollution and the erasure of flora and fauna. One of the key figures to symbolize this interconnection is Jean-Antoine Chaptal, a French chemist, industrialist, and statesman whose career interwove and symbolized the brilliance of human ingenuity, the golden age of French sciences and industrialization, and the newly found human capabilities of destruction brought by the marriage of politics, liberal capitalism and modern science.

Chaptal's life story however, was not confined to France. During the nineteenth century, even though local conditions varied by country, the role of scientific expertise of physicians, economists, scientists, and engineers remained key in promoting the idea of the benign and omnipresent knowledge of modern science. But in fact, as the authors clearly show, applied knowledge always served the interests of both the state and industry.

As the French masterplan to rise to world dominance faded away by the late nineteenth century, the authors venture away from the French case to more successful economies, and as such, to even more rapacious stories of pollution by examining rapidly developing Germany, the United States and the British Empire. The widely spread British Empire is used to discuss instances of worldwide pollution. These often do not offer novum for readers of English-language environmental histories of the modern world, such as *Something New Under the Sun* by J. R. McNeill.

Just before the reader feels that their desire to finish the book is diminishing because of the repeated presentation of all-too-well-known stories, Jarridge and Le Roux make a noble attempt to incorporate war and its contaminations into the volume. This is a rather successful detour because they are capable of showing how war and warfare was an integral prime mover of the chemical and other heavy industries and as such a root cause for ecological depletion globally. Although their analysis focuses on the “Great War” from a particularly French perspective, it is yet again an important contribution, largely missing from English language environmental histories. The authors take the Great War as a springboard that they follow with an analysis war pollutions in World War II and the Cold War—here again relying largely on secondary sources.

The last chapters of this volume summarize the formation of postmodern consumer societies, and end with dark analysis of how local pollution issues developed into a global pollution crisis over just a few centuries. Ending on this pessimistic note, the authors still hope that stories and lessons of the past will contribute to a more successful coexistence of humans and nature in the future. Yet this book’s contents offers little if any hope for trust in human wisdom and consideration.

In conclusion, Jarridge and Le Roux have fashioned a brilliant and comprehensive book that is an important addition to the existing and growing literature of the environmental history of global issues, such as pollution. The authors use similar techniques as other historians by summarizing the status quo in areas and historical periods outside of their core expertise, however this book’s core contribution is not necessarily in these passages, repeating well-known histories of pollution, but in the uniquely French context, and the theories which spring up from the interconnectedness of science, state, and capitalism in France. It is hard to deny that this work seems particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the interests of science, big business, and national states seem to intertwine ever closer.

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