

## Actors of the environment: living, exploiting, representing

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May 13th 2020 (University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin)

Workshop CULTURHISTO organized by CHCSC and DYPAC

Since 2012, a project to set up an offshore wind farm off the bay of Saint-Brieuc in northern Brittany in France crystallized tensions between industrialists, fishermen, environmental protection associations and the inhabitants of the bay. Indeed, each of these actors developed different bonds with their environment, shaped by their specific interests and behaviors<sup>1</sup>. That testifies the plurality of the strategies of these actors in their way of living, exploiting and thinking the environment.

First, the environment can be defined as everything that surrounds human beings. Generally, it includes all the biotic or abiotic elements, whether objective or subjective, that surrounds an individual or a society, some of which contribute directly to provide the individual needs<sup>2</sup>. However, a strict separation between man and nature cannot be maintained for long. Following the perspective of William Cronon<sup>3</sup>, one can deconstruct the myth of wilderness: human societies do not find "virgin nature" which they exploit to fulfill their needs while, at the same time, destroying the so-called environmental naturalness. We must therefore consider a social construction of the environment by linking physical and human history. It is also about recalling the dialogical and dialectical nature of the relationship between societies and their environment, taking not only the bonds of man to the environment and of the environment to man into account, but also the cyclical and reflexive processes induced by their respective actions. This is why we have chosen to focus on environmental actors, in particular human societies, as they are at heart of this dual relationship. Nevertheless, following footsteps of environmental history, it is necessary for us to take a step back from an anthropocentric point of view, and to keep in mind the agency of the fauna and flora, which are properactors and can not only be recuded to the mererank of scenery, passive objet of man's action in his environment<sup>4</sup>.

This variety of actions and interactions between stakeholders and the environment can be broken down into three notions. The first one is the concept of inhabiting, borrowed from the geographical studies. It insists on the analysis of the "being-world" of the actors of a territory: the different ways they have of appropriating, building, developing and using a

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Kiesel, « Baie de Saint-Brieuc. Idées fausses et questions sur les éoliennes en mer », *www.ouest-France.fr*, published the 03/16/2018.

<sup>2</sup> « Environnement » in *Grand Larousse illustré*, Paris, Larousse, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> W. Cronon, « The Trouble with wilderness : or, getting back to the wrong nature », *Environmental History*, 1-1, janvier 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Grégory Quenet, *Qu'est-ce que l'histoire environnementale ?*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2014, p 11.

place and the consequences on the actors, in a reflexive process. The next one is exploitation, which questions the process of transforming any location into a resource, the process of industrialization of living entities and the logic of nature consumption. This notion of exploitation should not be understood in a purely production driven sense but in its most neutral sense, thus integrating the logic of environmental preservation and conservation. Finally, from a cultural perspective, the concept of representation invites us to set out the conditions for the possibility of a discourse or a refiguration of the environment. This is done by highlighting the competition for the resources of the environment and the scale and limits of the representations of the environment.

This study day is thus intended to fall within the field of environmental history - a field that has developed particularly since the 1970s in the United States and in the Anglo-Saxon world, but which is still relatively recent in France<sup>5</sup>. Through the proposed papers and in a historical and transdisciplinary approach, the aim is to try to understand the diversity of both the ecological structures that make up ancient and contemporary societies and also the practices, relationships and uses of the actors who participate in these structures. This transdisciplinary approach is essential because we cannot do without the contribution of the other sciences to understand the dialectic outlined between actors and the environment. Neither can we restrict the chronological and scalar framework of the interventions. As our approach is intended to be culturalist, i.e. a social history of representations, we will take care to understand the actors of the environment, their status, their training, their roles, their values and their representations. To do this, four research axis are proposed:

### **Actors of the environment**

From the individual and his personal relationship to his environment, to the authorities and institutions (public or private), through the identification of different social groups, who are the actors of the environment? This is also about questioning the nature of the actors and thus to break out from a natural anthropocentrism by questioning the specific agency of non-humans in the construction of their environment or their co-construction with man.

### **Uses of the environment**

Why and how do environmental actors use the environment? This axis raises the question of the relationship between the actors and their environment and, more particularly, focusing on the notion of uses, practical and pragmatic relationships that animate the different actors with respect to their environment. In this part, we have to question the notions of inhabiting and exploiting in all their semantic richness. We will be able to articulate reflections around the notions of production, consumption, conservation and preservation.

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<sup>5</sup> Fabien Locher et Grégory Quenet, « l'histoire environnementale : origines, enjeux et perspectives d'un nouveau chantier », *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2009/4 n°56-4, pages 7 à 38.

## **Conflicts and environmental sharing**

How do relationships operate within an environment we have to share? How is it shared or, on the contrary, exclusively appropriated? The purpose is to study the relationships between the actors confronted to each others, and how their use of their environment can be a source of struggle, inequality or negotiation. Those bonds can be approached and apprehended from the most virulent conflict for the appropriation of a resource to an accepted and reasoned sharing.

## **How to represent the environment? How to get a picture of it?**

Finally, from a more social and cultural perspective, we will look at the representations that the actors have or make of the environment, whether these are mental, pictorial, discursive, philosophical, religious, cartographic and so on. The aim is to rethink the environment as a construction by its different actors by studying the mechanisms and conditions of environmental representations. The challenge is also to question the evolution of the sensitive relationship between societies and their environment through their aesthetics or their imaginations.

### Calendar:

Call for papers at the latest by **February 25<sup>th</sup> 2020**

Answers to candidates at the latest by **March 15<sup>th</sup> 2020**

Workshop's day: **May 13<sup>th</sup> 2020**

### Terms and conditions:

This workshop is multidisciplinary and opened to several fields of research in humanities (sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, art history, medicine history, musicology, literature, theater studies, film studies, visual history, law, languages, information and communication science).

This call for papers is addressed to all PhD students and young doctors who presented their thesis defense in the last few years.

Each paper will be either in French or English. The propositions (about 500 words) have to be sent with a short presentation of the author (title, field of the PhD, if necessary, year of the thesis defense and the university or the affiliated organization) at the latest by February 25<sup>th</sup> 2020 at the following address: [doctorants.chcsc@gmail.com](mailto:doctorants.chcsc@gmail.com)