

Lecture #21: Environmentalism Triumphant?

Suggested Readings:

Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the U.S.*, 1987.

Lewis L. Gould, *Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment*, 1988.

Noel M. Burns, *Erie: The Lake that Survived*, 1985.

Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, 2001.

Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America*, 2012.

Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*, 2013.

David Stradling, *The Environmental Moment: 1968-1972 (Classic Texts)*, 2012.

Outline

I. Mounting Crisis and the Beauty of America

by mid-1960s, old conservation movement gradually undergoing a sea change toward environmentalism:

contributing strands included population, bomb, pesticides, aesthetic conservation, wilderness.

crisis of values as much as of resources

from ethic focused on producers to one organized around consumers, from work to leisure

ugliness of human landscape a central critique, in contrast to natural beauty

urban "blight," litter, and billboards as chief objects of aesthetic criticism

champion of anti-litter/billboard cause: Claudia Alta Taylor, a.k.a. Lady Bird Johnson, married LBJ 11/17/34,

entered White House 1963 with strong political agenda for beauty

First Ladies as significant political movers when they wish to shape Washington politics

"beautification" became Lady Bird's chief theme: first sought plants for Washington

joined Laurance Rockefeller to organize May 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty, issued

report on *Beauty for America*: "ugliness is bitterness," crisis of spirit

10/22/65: Highway Beautification Act created fund to buy billboards, wall off junkyards (never as successful as hoped, proved to benefit billboard co.s in certain ways)

Lady Bird's vision of America as garden: the flowering plant as symbol of restored beauty

Notice too that Laurance Rockefeller's Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission report in 1962

(appointed by Eisenhower, reported to Kennedy, implemented by Johnson) recommended Wilderness

Act (1964); Land and Water Conservation Fund (1964); national lakeshores, seashores, and

recreational areas; wild and scenic rivers, etc.: broad commitment to access to outdoor recreation

II. Air, Water, and the Premature Death of Lake Erie

crisis of beauty not limited to billboards; pollution too a source of ugliness & sickness

mounting concern about hazards of air pollution, smog in cities, factory emissions, citizens protest usually at local level, typical of many such pollution actions

hostility toward corporate pollution easy target; fear too of science and technology echoed fallout and pesticides controversies. cf. anti-flouride campaigns of 1950s, attacking flouridation of public water supplies as toxic, anti-libertarian, Communist (hence Mom & Apple Pie marketing of Crest when introduced as first flouride toothpaste in 1956)

water as much a source of ugliness as air, with corporate sources objects of attack

classic cases: Torrey Canyon tanker disaster in 1967, Santa Barbara oil spill 1969: "the blowout heard around the world" ran wild for ten days, fowled beach, killed wildlife: images of oil-laden birds and marine animals become symbol of devastated nature

Lake Erie equally famous case of pollution reported widely in media: Cuyahoga River fire in 1969 (& before)

Erie as shallowest of Great Lakes, most industrial, steady accumulation of heavy metals since 19th century, rising mercury levels in fish, DDT byproducts in sediments

worse: eutrophication from over-fertilization of water with nitrogen and phosphorous, produced algal blooms, decay of dead plants yielding oxygen deficit, killing fish

by mid-1960s, scientists and activists announcing "the death of Lake Erie", irreversible?

but eutrophication less from industry than more domestic sources: agricultural nitrate fertilizer, and home laundry done with new phosphate detergents, introduced by Proctor & Gamble 1933 as Dreft, dramatically increased phosphate content of sewage & lake

(note that apocalyptic portraits of Lake Erie "death" in 1960s did not come true: shifts in detergents and sewage treatment slowed many eutrophication processes; although pollution by toxics and heavy metals continues, early prophecies proved considerably exaggerated)

III. The Unexpected Consequences of a Consumer Society

problem of disposing soapy water akin to problem of disposing increasing solid wastes from non-returnable bottles, heavily packaged goods, fast foods

important links here to underlying structural changes in American life: mass housing communities like post-WWII Levittown made affordable housing widely available

shifts in food market: coming of refrigerators cheap enough for ordinary consumers to afford allowed families to store much fresher food for longer periods, reducing labor of cooking

shift depended on invention of chlorofluorocarbons--CFCs--as easily compressed gases capable of very efficient cooling even at modest compression, very low toxicity, all solving serious dangers and expenses associated with previous industrial refrigeration by ammonia

automobile and refrigerator changed nature of food marketing in post-WWII suburb: daily shopping with small handbasket replaced by weekly shopping in large grocery cart, 1937

Clarence Birdseye (1886-1956) tries quick freezing of fish in 1923, able to freeze meat, vegetables by 1928, founds General Foods Co., making frozen food widely available by 1930s

assembly line factory assembly of food replaced home cooking (TV dinner as metaphor): parallels increasing participation of women in workforce

simultaneously: rise of fast food industry, (Ray Kroc buys franchise to MacDonald Brothers' hamburger stand in 1954 with first franchise in Des Plaines, IL, purchases entire company in 1961; Col. Harland Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise begun 1956), providing alternative auto-dependent diet outside home

all of these changes of food and diet tied to changes in marketing: frozen and canned convenience foods all sold in disposable packages which are central to advertising product

ergo: rising solid waste problems in decades following WWII; motorized refuse collection had begun in some cities in 1910-20 period, large-scale garbage collection essential by 1950s

hence corporations/factories not only source of problem; American standard of living to blame

Walt Kelly's Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." chief slogan of new movement

IV. Earth Day

sense of apocalypse at end of decade of turmoil: Civil Rights, Vietnam, continuing Cold War, combined with vision of earthrise over Apollo 8's moon (photo taken on 12/24/1968), unity of humanity

environmentalism a call to unity, collective guilt, in national crisis of divisiveness

on one hand: grassroots movement that white middle-class people could feel unthreatened by, sidetracking attention from more conflicted areas of social justice, racial conflict, Vietnam War; on other hand, genuinely collective impulse toward action on behalf of whole community, rhetoric of inclusiveness even if underlying conflicts not fully addressed

Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, 1968: "We are as gods and might as well get good at it"

September 1969, Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D, WI) proposes day of national reflection on environmental crisis: 1st Earth Day, April 22, 1970. widespread activism, media attention

declarations of crisis, calls for new spiritual vision, and practical suggestions: returnable bottles, fight pollution, preserve open space, put bricks in toilets

but problem here: are these small acts really adequate responses to potential apocalypse? tension between rhetoric of doom and apparently incommensurate responses