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Review: Managing the Unknown: Essays on Environmental Ignorance

Edited by Frank Uekotter and Uwe Lubken

Reviewed by Yves Laberge

Quebec, Canada

Uekotter, Frank and Lubken, Uwe. (Eds.) *Managing the Unknown: Essays on Environmental Ignorance*. New York: Berghahn, 2014. Vi+200 pp, ISBN: 9781782382522, hardback. US\$120.00; also available as an e-book; paperback forthcoming. Series: *Environment in History: International Perspectives*.

Appearing in the Berghahn book series "Environment in History: International Perspectives," *Managing the Unknown: Essays on Environmental Ignorance* gathers eight new essays about the consequences of being unaware or insensible regarding environmental hazards. Dr. Frank Uekotter (Department of History, University of Birmingham) and Dr. Uwe Lubken (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität) propose a welcome addition to this emerging field of research known as "the social functions of ignorance" (p. 2). As the co-editors point out in their Introduction, "It does not take long explanation to see that the environment is a good topic for studies of ignorance" (p. 2).

Topics and countries studied herein prove to be of a great variety: archeology, agriculture, marine resources, and Environmental History, from Germany to Palestine. Possibly the most rewarding chapter from an historical perspective, Susan Herrington's comparative piece about the Canadian forests, tries to explain why Canadian citizens were so unaware of the fragility of these wide spaces, perceiving them as a lucrative resource to be exploited, especially during the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries (p. 66). Two perspectives coexisted, however, during the colonial, Pre-Confederation Canada because French-Canadians and English-Canadians were inspired by different worldviews regarding nature and conservation:

"French-speaking intellectuals, politicians, and lumbermen in Québec were heavily influenced by conservation thought in nineteenth century France; English-Canadians received their ideas primarily from Germany, via the United States" (Ken Drushka, quoted by Herrington, p. 53).

Here again, history reconfirms that those policymakers in a position of power controlled the forest exploitation in Canadian provinces and could afford to ignore divergent perspectives that were nonetheless more sustainable and more widely spread in other countries at the same time (p. 53).

Theoretically, the strongest chapter is probably Hugh Gorman's "Thinking in Cycles." It introduces a rich theoretical reflection centered on cycles in environmental awareness with concepts such as "Ecological Constraint" and "Ecological Limits" by studying fertilizers containing nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium that were commonly used on U.S. farms during the 20th century (p. 44).

Despite the rigor of the argumentation, the number of topics covered and the abundance of endnotes, I have a few quibbles regarding this book. First, the co-editors seem reluctant to provide at least one tentative definition of ignorance. In their Introduction, they argue that “it seems crucial to refrain from defining a typology of ignorance, as that may do more to constrain scholarly interest than to stimulate it” (p. 6). I strongly disagree with this attitude, especially when writing a scholarly book; definitions are always needed in any argumentative text, even if it is tentative, reformulated, or eliminated. Secondly, the absence of an abstract before each chapter can be frustrating for the reader (or librarian) who wants to capture an essay’s topic, scope, era, and keywords. As is the case with so many collections of essays, the absence of a general conclusion (for example written by the co-editors) leaves a lost opportunity to synthesize the main ideas and parallels brought forth by the authors. As such, *Managing the Unknown: Essays on Environmental Ignorance* remains an uneven collection because many essays concentrate on a historical period (typically the early 20th Century) for a topic — environmental ignorance — that is critical for our epoch (see chapters 1, 2, 4, 8). Therefore, Uekotter and Lubken’s book will appeal mostly to scholars already familiar with Ignorance Studies and Environmental History.

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