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

By Francois Jarrige and Thomas Le Roux

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Jarrige, François and Le Roux, Thomas (translated by Janice Egan and Michael Egan). *The Contamination of the Earth: A History of Pollutions in the Industrial Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020. 480 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262-04383-0, hardcover, US\$39.95.

The Contamination of the Earth: A History of Pollutions in the Industrial Age is a fascinating book from the start. In contrast to many books, even the foreword written by one of its translators, Michael Egan is worth reading. He provides an interesting reflection about the translation of the word “pollution”. Throughout the original French text, the authors refer to “pollutions” in the plural, while typical English practice is to singularize the multitude of contaminants emitted into the air, soil, water, and living bodies. By using the plural “pollutions,” the translators hope this becomes acceptable and accepted practice in English works. Perhaps this is one major contribution of translated works, that they challenge us to consider the meaning of the words themselves.

Jarrige and Le Roux examine in their introduction how the meaning of the word pollution changed from its religious or moral context in Latin to the present one by the early 19th century. The remainder of the book goes through all kind of pollutions from ancient times, although focusing on the period between the rise of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth century and the early 1970s. It deals with pollution of air and water, solid waste and radioactivity, and their dilution into the air and oceans, displacement onto the land of poor people, indigenous lands and to developing countries. Thus, it seems to take up most of the themes within environmental history between its covers. For

scholars focusing on one pollution, it provides an important reminder on how we tend to transform one form of pollution to other forms of pollution instead of solving the problem. Scholars of legal history again might find it interesting to read how complex power relationships and different legislative regimes have influenced law-making.

The authors show how our tolerance for pollution has gradually grown due to its ubiquity in the name of economic liberalization and expanding wealth. Meanwhile interest lobbies and the “merchants of doubt” have steadily grown stronger and more organized, creating sclerosis of uncertainty, slowing down any effective measure. When acid rain emerged as a problem in the 1960s, industrialists followed the manual provided by the tobacco industry, claiming that the scientific knowledge was insufficient to provide certainty or justify regulatory measures. Regarding the destruction of the ozone layer caused by chlorofluorocarbons identified in the 1970s, manufacturers asserted that the hole found over Antarctica was due to natural variations. Finally, in the case of climate change, the merchants of doubt focused first on the reality of the phenomenon, then on the question of whether or not greenhouse gases should be considered as pollutants.

The authors leave any potential messages of hope to the last pages of the book. Understanding how we got here in the first place is, however, a necessity to solve our problems. In this regard the book provides a good starting point. For hope, look elsewhere.

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