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Edited by

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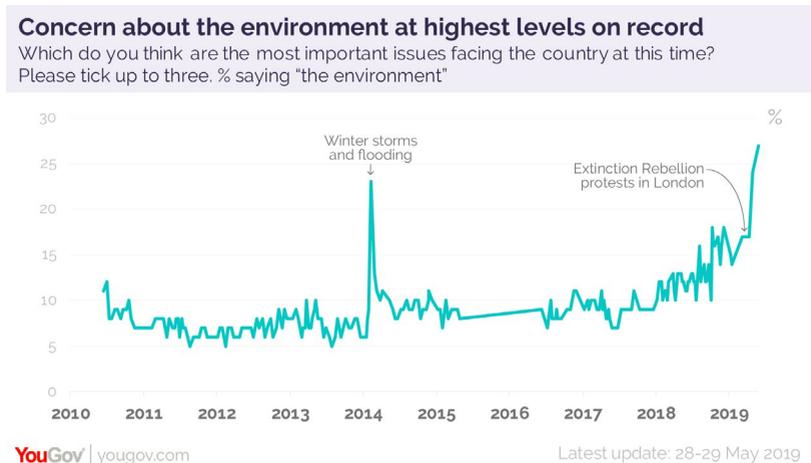
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INTRODUCTION

BRENDAN PRENDIVILLE¹

According to a YouGov poll, in May 2019, public concern for the environment reached a record high of 27%, in third place after Brexit and health. Young people in Britain were even more concerned, with 45% of 18-24 year olds putting the environment just after Brexit (Smith 2019). The graph published alongside the poll data traced the evolution of this concern from 2010 to 2019, showing a second, short-lived peak in 2014 of 23%.

Figure 0.1. Concern about the environment at highest levels record



Source: Smith 2019.

For each of these two peaks of environmental concern, the author of the online article proffered an explanation: in 2014, it was extreme weather and, in 2019, protests on climate change.

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On the question of weather, climate scientists, researchers and certain media commentators alike have long been wary of linking extreme weather events with climate change. However, in the UK at least, the increasingly frequent episodes of such weather² may be changing that reticence³ and some sections of the general public already seem less wary of making this connection. A 2018 poll by the centre-right think tank Bright Blue revealed that “nearly two-thirds of UK adults (64%) agree that weather around the world is becoming more extreme because of climate change caused by humans. A higher proportion (72%) of under 40s agree. A slightly smaller majority of Conservative voters (54%) also agree.” (Hall 2018)

Whatever the state of opinion, the reality of a rise in extreme weather events in the UK is clear enough, as illustrated by the Royal Meteorological Society: “Nine of the 10 warmest years for the UK have occurred since 2002 and all the top 10 warmest years have occurred since 1990.” As for rainfall, “[seven] of the 10 wettest years for the UK have occurred since 1998” (Kendon et al. 2018, 2).

On climate change protest, Britain has found itself at the centre of a global protest movement since October 2018 when the environmentalist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) was launched. XR defines itself as “an international apolitical network using non-violent direct action to persuade governments to act on the Climate and Ecological Emergency”⁴ and since its creation, it has been very active. In April 2019, it blocked traffic at different points in London for over a week causing much disruption and attracting huge media interest. During this same week, the young Swedish environmentalist, Greta Thunberg, paid a visit to Britain’s capital city during which she made two speeches: the first at a demonstration of XR

² Britain has experienced highly volatile weather patterns since the turn of the century (<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/past-uk-weather-events>) with 2012 standing out as “the year Britain’s weather turned dangerous” (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/jan/04/2012-year-british-weather-dangerous>). The increase in the number of serious and often deadly floods is a particular worry.

³ In a recent article by Kate Sambrook and Thomas Richardson, there appears to be linkage between the two phenomena: “In December 2015 Storm Desmond travelled across the North Atlantic, leaving in its wake an ‘atmospheric river’ of super-moist air. Record-breaking rainfall caused major flooding across Ireland and northern England. Researchers at Oxford University and the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute have shown climate change increased the frequency of a rainfall event like Storm Desmond by 59%.” (Sambrook and Richardson 2019)

⁴ <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/demands/>. Accessed 10 July 2019.

activists, the second to MPs in Parliament in which she berated the government for its energy choices:

The UK's active current support of new exploitation of fossil fuels—for example, the UK shale gas fracking industry, the expansion of its North Sea oil and gas fields, the expansion of airports as well as the planning permission for a brand new coal mine—is beyond absurd. (Thunberg 2019)

Three months later, on 15th July, XR began what it termed its “summer uprising” of civil disobedience in five major cities. The movement has also gone global with similar actions in the US, Germany and Australia to name but three of the countries.⁵

One of the main “precipitating factors” (Smelser 1962 in Martell 1994, 111) that sparked XR off was the publication in October 2018 of an IPCC Special Report (IPCC 2018) on the need to keep global warming below 1.5°C if climate change catastrophe was to be avoided. This would mean “immediately cutting the planet’s emissions to 45% below 2010 levels by 2030” (Cool Earth 2018). Such a stark scenario gave rise to dramatic media headlines: “We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN” wrote *The Guardian*, for example (Watts 2018) and similar attention-grabbing titles were reproduced in various publications over the next days and weeks. Subsequently, a prominent climate scientist criticised such sloganising, seeing it as both potentially frightening as well as misleading (Allen 2018).⁶ Misleading or not, the effect on the general public was to add to a general atmosphere of apocalypse in the not too distant future and this chimed with XR’s message:

While environmental movements typically combine *urgency* and *optimism* (“if we act now, we can still solve this problem”), XR is clearly emphasising catastrophism and disaster (“We will not be led quietly to annihilation by the elites and politicians”, write the group). (Doherty et al. 2018)

⁵ On its website, Extinction Rebellion lists the following countries involved in the movement: USA, Germany, South Africa, Italy, France, New Zealand, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Spain (<https://xrebellion.org/>. Accessed 10 July 2019).

⁶ Myles Allen is Professor of Geosystem Science and leader of the Climate Research Programme at the Environmental Change Institute of the University of Oxford (UK).

Interestingly, this doomsday scenario is reminiscent of early 1970s Britain in which there was also “a very real fear . . . of impending environmental catastrophe” (Wilson 2014, 257).⁷ Joe Weston referred to that period’s crisis discourse as a platform for the “new environmentalism” of the time:

It was a radicalism which believed in the existence of an “ecological crisis”: a “crisis” which had been created by modern industrial affluence; a “crisis” which required both radical social change and the acceptance that ecological concerns should transcend all others These twin emphases—“ecological crisis” and the need for social change—were the dominant themes of early 1970s environmentalism. (Weston 1986, 17)

Clearly, over the last two years, the environment in general, and climate change in particular, have become prominent issues outside Westminster. What about inside the corridors of power? Two government initiatives stand out. Firstly, in January 2018, the government announced its 25-Year Environment Plan fulfilling its 2017 manifesto promise that “we pledge to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it” (Conservative Party 2017, 26). When the plan was published, reaction was mixed. On the one hand, there were several positives such as, among others, the creation of a new environmental watchdog, action to tackle plastic pollution, action on air pollution, mitigation and adaptation to climate change and, promises to deliver a “green Brexit”. On the other hand, there was widespread disappointment and criticism concerning the lack of implementation guarantees. Various green groups pointed to the need for legislation to enforce such a wide-ranging number of promises spanning a quarter of a century. Others criticised the lack of urgent short-term measures, particularly on the question of air pollution and plastics. On air pollution, the government has already lost three cases in the High Court to the environmentalist group ClientEarth⁸ (Harvey 2018), and on plastics, the WWF sardonically pointed out: “If we wait until 2042 to end plastic waste, as the plan suggests, there will be more plastic than fish in the sea.” (WWF 2018a) On

⁷ This discourse of catastrophism could also be linked to the “survivalist thinking” of Edward Goldsmith, co-founder of *The Ecologist* magazine in 1970 (Prendiville 2014).

⁸ “ClientEarth is a charity that uses the power of the law to protect the planet and the people who live on it. We are lawyers and environmental experts who are fighting against climate change and to protect nature and the environment.” (<https://www.clientearth.org/what-we-do/>)

a wider scale, the longstanding environmentalist Paul Ekins commented that “there is *nothing* to stop a future government simply ignoring it” (Ekins 2018).⁹

The second initiative of the government was on the question of climate change. Following the advice of its Climate Change Committee (CCC), the Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced in June 2018 that her government would amend the Climate Change Act (2008) to include a commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions to zero—what is called “net zero carbon”—by 2050. This is an ambitious target but one which the chairman of the CCC, John Gummer, considers to be “necessary, feasible and cost effective” (Darby 2019).

Against this background of renewed interest, activism and a certain amount of public anguish concerning the environment, this collection of essays will analyse the different facets of environmentalism and political ecology, beginning with an overview of the historical environmental(ist) movement (Chapter One). Chapter Two and Chapter Three will centre on the issue of climate change, in terms of politics and activist profiles. Chapter Four also focuses on environmentalist activism but more particularly from the standpoint of British youth. Chapter Five analyses the ideological dimensions of political ecology and Marxism and Chapter Six studies environmentalism in the devolved country of Wales.

The background to the contemporary environmentalist movement is the subject of the opening contribution to this book by **Brendan Prendiville**. The chapter traces the evolution of the movement from its beginnings in the mid-19th century up to the early 21st century. Such a long historical journey involves making choices and the author has done this by selecting three periods in which environmentalist action was most intense: 1860s-early 1900s, late 1960s-late 1980s, and 1990s-today. This was a journey which saw Britain move from a position of industrial and imperial glory to one of a post-industrial and post-imperial island, situated off the west coast of continental Europe. The author explains how the first period of Victorian environmentalism was, to a large degree, a reaction to the pollution of the industrial revolution and the damage this caused to both the natural and social environments. Perhaps the best example of this pollution was that of coal, the fossil fuel which, literally and metaphorically, drove the engine of the industrialisation process and imperial conquest. Indeed, its importance was such that any attempts by environmental

⁹ Paul Ekins is Professor of Resources and Environmental Policy at University College London and Director of the UCL Institute for Sustainable Resources. He was also a prominent member of the Green Party during the 1970s and 1980s, which he eventually left after failing to reform its structure (Prendiville 2014).

groups to mitigate the effects of coal pollution on public health were, at the time at least, to little avail. As noted in the chapter, this could be seen as an illustration of what modern environmentalists call “environmental injustice” in that, in the example given of Manchester, urban areas of deprivation were affected far more by atmospheric pollution than the more affluent, suburban areas.

However, Victorian environmentalism was not only concerned with pollution and protecting the natural environment. It also aimed at reuniting the people, particularly, the poorer, urban working classes, with the natural world. This could be seen with the creation of the Commons Preservation Society, formed in 1865 “to protect London commons from urban development and to protect open space for public recreation” (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 35). Here, environmentalists were active in protecting the green spaces that already existed within cities. A complementary aim was to allow people to escape from the pollution of urban areas by walking (or, later, cycling) in the countryside around the towns. The author shows how important the 19th-century ramblers’ clubs were in this campaign to win the “right to roam” for the whole British public.

Contemporary environmentalism in Britain is often seen as arising in the 1970s with the arrival of new environmental groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. As the author points out, the seeds of this “second wave” of British environmentalism were planted in the previous decade, in terms of awareness, ideas and, to a certain extent, popular culture. The 1960s generation had new perceptions of the environment and of the action needed to protect it. Novel forms of direct action became popular and, later (in the late 1980s), the new environmental discourse of “sustainable development” went mainstream with the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987). By the end of the 1980s, certain green groups had acquired more media credibility and even recognition by government agencies for their environmental expertise. Somewhat paradoxically, this relative success was instrumental in creating a new environmentalist wave, composed of younger, more radical activists, frustrated by what they saw as a lack of progress on the environmental question. Their elders, they believed, had “gone native” by getting too close to the political powers that be and, as a result, had become too “managerial” (Dobson 1990, 13) in their approach to environmental problems. A new type of political ecology, or “ecologism” (*ibid.*), was necessary.

In the following essay, **Neil Carter** pursues the climate change question from a party political point of view by analysing the ways in which the politics of climate change were transformed between 2006 and

2010. At the time, the Labour Party had been in government since 1997 and, at the outset of his premiership, PM Tony Blair showed much interest in the environmental question: “In 1996, Tony Blair made a speech on ‘sustainable development’ to the Green Alliance declaring that ‘the environment is actually at the heart of Labour’s political agenda’, a statement that was repeated in so many words in the manifesto the following year (‘We will put concern for the environment at the heart of policy-making...’).” (see Prendiville 2013)

Indeed, the incoming Labour government was soon thrust into international negotiations on climate change (December 1997), becoming one of the main architects of the Kyoto Protocol which emerged, and agreeing to reduce its own emissions of greenhouse gases by 12,5% (below 1990 levels) by 2012, twice the average commitment. It also set up a programme to cut its carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 20% (below 1990 levels) by 2010, including the use of eco-taxes such as the Climate Change Levy (1999), a tax on energy use.

However, by 2005, this no longer seemed to be the case as the author points out: “Before 2005-2006, the environment was low on the UK political agenda.” (see also Prendiville 2006) More specifically, the government had adopted an “incremental approach” to climate change and energy policy, and this approach became increasingly criticised from within Parliament (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2005) and without (Sustainable Development Commission, 2003). The “step-change” came in 2008 with the passing of the Climate Change Act. This legislation was the first in the world to give a “legal underpinning” to governmental emission targets and made the British government legally responsible for reaching them. It also included the creation of an independent Climate Change Committee to advise the government on how to meet these targets.

There were several reasons for this transformation of government policy but the most significant one came from the Opposition’s new leader, David Cameron.¹⁰ In his wish to modernise the Conservative Party, he decided to give it a green image. This involved various photo opportunities such as a trip to Alaska to “hug a husky” dog or riding a bike to work at Parliament.¹¹ More significantly, Cameron also supported the “Big Ask” campaign set up by Friends of the Earth (FoE) to force a

¹⁰ Neil Carter points to other reasons also such as the publication of the influential Stern Report in 2006, a change in the attitude of the business sector and the media interest in environmental issues which increased between 2005 and 2006.

¹¹ It was later discovered that his chauffeur-driven car was following behind. During this greening process, the Conservatives also changed their logo to a tree.

Climate Change Bill through Parliament and this strategic move had huge political importance, as observed by the author: “By declaring his support for the Big Ask campaign for a climate change bill, Cameron was able to turn his green rhetoric into policy substance. With the Liberal Democrats already supporting it, Cameron’s shift placed huge pressure on the Labour Government to respond.” The response was rapid: “Within weeks, the Government had announced its support for a Climate Change Bill.”

The author continues his argument by showing how this brief political consensus waned in the aftermath of a disappointing COP15 in December 2009 and in the context of the financial crisis. The following year, the coalition government came into power and progressively, climate change became an issue of conflict within the Tory Party.

Clare Saunders delves further into contemporary British environmentalism by looking “beyond the assumption that the environmental movement in Britain can be considered straightforwardly representative of two or more distinct waves of environmentalism”. Although the author accepts that this type of representation of British environmentalism/political ecology can “enrich our understanding of environmental action [and provide a] useful schematic framework for this understanding”, she believes it is insufficient and illustrates this with an analysis of the “ideological persuasions within the environmental movement in Britain”. This analysis is presented in two parts: firstly by a study of the “environmentalist ideology of political ecology” and, secondly, by a presentation of fieldwork undertaken during two climate change protests in 2009 and 2010.¹²

In reviewing the literature on the emergence of political ecology as an ideology, the author points to the “neglect of the political dimensions of human/environment interactions” (Vayada and Walters 1999, 168). The term itself is built on the coming together of a social science (politics) and natural science (ecology) or, to see it in another light, the study of human behaviour and non-human behaviour. As such, “[some] kind of holistic approach is required”, that is, a symbiosis “between politics, the economy and the wider natural and non-natural environment”. In the author’s view, this coming together is not always immediately obvious as exemplified by the new environmental discourse of “Sustainable development” that appeared in the 1980s. The way in which this term is interpreted and applied can be far removed from political ecology and may even cause increased environmental damage. Clare Saunders therefore concludes that “an approach to ‘sustainable development’ that proposes merely tinkering

¹² The first of these protests took place at the time of the Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP15, December 2009) in Paris and the second while the COP16 (December 2010) was taking place in Cancun.

with current lifestyles to reduce the ecological impacts of human lifestyles (e.g. by promoting low emissions cars rather than less polluting alternatives like public transport, walking or cycling) hardly hits the mark". Equally, there is a danger that in the balance between the political and the ecological, one may outweigh the other and it is this equilibrium that the author examines in the data collected during her fieldwork.

In terms of methodology, Clare Saunders has a different approach to many researchers in this field who concentrate on environmental organisations as a way of tracing the evolution of environmentalism in Britain. By contrast, her approach is based on understanding individual (*i.e.* activist) points of view. In this way, environmentalism can be better understood: "Examining the ideological positions of individuals engaged in environmental protests can help improve our existing knowledge of environmental movements." This is done by harvesting the views of individuals taking part in climate change protest as to their motivations for taking action. Protesters were given questionnaires to fill out and a certain number accepted follow-up, face-to-face interviews.

Three questions in particular were used to "measure whether climate change protesters [had] a distinct environmentalist ideology and/or a political ecology ideology". These questions concerned, firstly, the reasons for protesting, secondly, who was to blame for climate change and, thirdly, what they thought should be done about it. The findings revealed that there were very few political ecologists, as such, present at the protests, that is, people whose answers were based on both politics and ecology in approximately equal measure: ". . . in total only 4.3% of the entire sample merge political and ecological prognoses and diagnoses and can therefore be classified as political ecologists."

Sarah Pickard picks up the issue of environmental activism and analyses it in relation to British youth. Approaching the subject from a sociological perspective, the study is built around two social movement theories: political opportunity and resource mobilisation. Methodologically, the author divides environmental structures into formal and non-formal Environmental Movement Organisations. The former are those "formal structures obtaining resources via membership fees and fundraising, which are mainly spent on administration and campaigns", including organisations such as Friends of the Earth or the Green Party. The latter are those environmental groups which are less structured and less institutionalised such as Climate Camp or Earth First!. They have no official membership and, consequently, few financial resources, making a high level of activist participation a necessity. A further methodological division is made by the author between reformist and radical environmentalists. Reformist

environmentalists are more likely to use traditional political methods to further their cause, such as lobbying political parties, electoral campaigning or signing petitions, whereas radical environmentalists favour tactics such as direct action with a view to intervening directly to stop projects seen as damaging to the environment. This type of radical environmentalism was first observed during the early 1990s when an environmentalist campaign was formed to oppose the Thatcher government's road plan for Britain (see Chapter One). The tactics used by the protesters were spectacular (*e.g.* living in trees to prevent them from being felled), involving a high level of commitment on their part.

The chapter studies environmental activism among young people in Britain in the early 21st century in three parts: "First, the structures and channels of expression used by young environmentalists are documented. Then the key environmental issues supported by young environmental activists are outlined. Lastly, the methods employed by young environmental activists are discussed."

The author notes that the types of environmental activism young people engaged in reflected a form of disengagement from the political system, as well as from established environmental groups (Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, etc.), the latter being seen as too close to institutional politics to be effective.¹³ Sarah Pickard also notes that these types of activism were the result of "contextual political opportunity and resource mobilisation factors" such as "right-wing governments enacting austerity measures and backtracking on environmental pledges, as well as the rise of social media and global non-formal environmental movement organisations with an expanded repertoire of non-electoral environmental engagement".

A last, important point of what could be termed environmental political culture is made by the author in invoking the link that is established by many young environmentalists between ideas and practice. Many environmental protest camps (contemporary or past), such as those against fracking for example, are run along ecological lines. That is, nothing is wasted, recycling is routine and vegetarianism-veganism is often the norm. This is a collective lifestyle choice and a deliberate decision to live out what could be called green lifestyle politics for reasons of personal coherence, as well as an example to others of how (Western) lifestyles need to change to avoid more environmental damage. In this context of alternative lifestyles, the author also points to what is termed

¹³ Interestingly, this situation was similar to that of the early 1990s, illustrated in a report by Wilkinson and Mulgan on young people in Britain (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995).

“youth-led DIO (Do-It-Ourselves) entrepreneurial political participation and activism”.

Sebastian Berg introduces us to the beliefs underpinning environmentalism/political ecology and, more specifically, to the debate between ecologists and Marxists. He begins by asking the question as to “why cross-fertilisation between the arguments of the green movement and those of Marxists has not yet developed any further”. One answer to that question could be found in the disregard many seasoned Marxist radicals of the early 1970s had for the newly-arrived political ecologists onto the political scene. The author refers to British Marxists as having “frequently accused environmentalists of being middle-class romanticists, of distracting people from the class struggle, and of ignoring the class dimension of ecological destruction, which often affected poor people more severely” (Weston 1986, 18). Even within the institutional left of the early 1970s, politicians such as Anthony Crosland were openly hostile to environmentalists: “The Labour Party, up until the arrival of Tony Blair in 1997, looked down on environmentalists as affluent, middle-class conservationists who were attempting to ‘kick down the ladder [of affluence] behind them’¹⁴ and in large parts of the trade union movement, they were seen as a threat to jobs.” (Prendiville 2014)

The author points to several ideological differences between Marxism and political ecology such as the question of productionism. Productionism¹⁵ is the process of maximising economic growth and has been at the heart of government economic policy since the 19th century. Ecologists, on the contrary, see it as one of the main causes of ecological damage and a big obstacle to ecological sustainability. Following on from this, the strategies for social and economic change between Marxists and political ecologists also differ. British Greens, for example, believe in bottom-up changes, hence their support for a form of localism: “We encourage more self-reliant local and regional economies, which are diverse and can meet more needs locally.” (<https://policy.greenparty.org.uk/tm.html>) Marxists, on the other hand, are suspicious of such localism, preferring a top-down approach to social change: “Marxists consider changing the dominant regimes of accumulation and power as a necessary precondition for terminating any further destruction of the natural world. This requires a direct challenge to existing power relations rather than attempts at creating isolated ecological islands within capitalism.”

¹⁴ A well-known quote of Anthony Crosland (Crosland 1971).

¹⁵ Sometimes termed “productivism”. In referring to productionism, the author specifies that he is doing so “in a capitalist context”.

Despite these clear differences in their views of the environment and social change, the author believes that progress can be made—and has been made—in bringing the two ideological camps together. He points, for example, to “the contact between political ecology on the one hand and the alter-globalisation movement on the other” and that, as a result of this contact, “ecological activists reflected on the issue of global environmental justice and developed a wider understanding of the environment”. In his concluding remarks he summarises his argument thus: “Political ecologists concentrate more on practice and rely less on theory and analysis. Their approach to political change comes as a mixture of pragmatism and utopianism, whereas Marxists’ approach centres more on analysis and criticism.” His hope is that both sides will realise they need each other. The utopianism of political ecologists needs “critical analyses of power structures in order to be realistic and sustainable” whereas Marxist critiques “need utopias and creative fantasy in order not to retreat into a social democratic statist pragmatism—as much of neo-Marxism has done over recent decades”.

The final contribution to this book looks at environmentalism from a different angle. In a case study of environmentalism in Wales, **Stéphanie Bory** allows us to consider both the relationship between environmental groups and the political system, and to what extent national policy of devolution in this part of the UK has furthered the environmentalist cause. Regarding the latter, the environment has been the Welsh Assembly’s priority since devolution began, as the author points out: “Sustainable development is thus at the heart of the National Assembly’s actions.”¹⁶ Concerning the former, this chapter studies “the relationship between the political and voluntary spheres in Wales to determine whether they collaborate or compete on environmental matters”. In her three-part analysis, S. Bory observes that there was an initial will for the two sectors to work together on the environment when devolution was enacted and groups such as Sustainable Wales, Wales Environment Link or Cynnal Cymru-Sustain Wales are highlighted in this respect. One issue, for instance, which successfully brought environmentalists and the Welsh government together was that of energy policy. This became evident during the Silk Commission hearings on Welsh devolution in 2011, even if, on the specific issue of wind turbines in mid-Wales, the government seemed to be backtracking.

¹⁶ Different pieces of legislation have subsequently reinforced this commitment to the environment, most notably the Well-Being of Future Generations Act (2015) and the Environment Act (2016).

However, alongside this example of collaboration, the author points to how the Welsh ENGOs (Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations) have become increasingly politicised and, as a result, often find themselves in competition with the Welsh political parties. Such competition has been most visible during elections when the ENGOs put out reports on the environment which sometimes collide with the manifestos of the political parties.

The author also lays emphasis upon the fragmentation and division within Welsh civil society as a whole, which renders cooperation more difficult. She cites the large number of third-sector organisations in Wales (31,000) as well as a correspondingly large number of members (about one million from a population of circa three million). On a broader level, she concludes with the observation that Welsh civil society as a whole has an ambiguous, perhaps even contradictory, relationship with the political system, quoting Mark Drakeford (First Minister since 2018) who talked of “the on-going tension for a sector which wants to be both independent and influential: to be close to government and yet maintain a critical distance, and to be both inside and outside the tent . . . Civil society needs a collaborative, but not collusive, relationship with government.” (Drakeford 2011, 71)

This volume provides a panorama of the on-going debates about political ecology and environmentalism in contemporary Britain, in terms of structure and agency. On the one hand, the analysis of the party system’s influence on climate change policy and, on the other, studies of environmentalist/ecologist activism and ideas are both complementary ways of deepening research in this area. The following chapters are a contribution to that research and are aimed at specialists and non-specialists alike.

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CHAPTER ONE

POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND
ENVIRONMENTALISM IN BRITAIN:
AN OVERVIEW

BRENDAN PRENDIVILLE¹

Like many social movements, British environmentalism has moved in and out of history, being more or less visible depending on the social and environmental circumstances. Environmental groups and associations have existed in Britain since the 17th century² but in all that time, three periods stand out in terms of intensity of activity and support: the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, the late 1960s to the late 1980s and the early-1990s up to the present. These three periods,³ like the less active periods between them are, of course, all part of an environmentalist continuum and there is considerable overlap between them in terms of discourse and action. That is, they are all part of the green movement, although the shades of green have changed as British society has changed. From the Victorian environmentalists, swimming against a buoyant industrial(ist) tide, through the modern environmentalists questioning the limits of the Western socio-economic model to the political ecologists challenging the paradigm and the politics of this unsustainable model, the road has been a long one.

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² David Evans (1992, 34) traces interest in the natural environment back to The Temple Coffee House Botanic Club, founded in 1689.

³ Another way of visualising these three periods is that of concentric circles widening the sphere and influence of environmentalism over time.

Victorian Environmentalism

The Victorian environmentalists represent the first organised opposition to industrialisation and the society it was creating. Albeit small in numbers, they were active on different fronts, such as urban development, pollution, access to the countryside and conservation-preservation.

According to environmental historians, the first private environmental group to be formed in Britain was the Commons Preservation Society (CPS)⁴ whose stated aim was to protect green spaces in and around London from development projects. This was the first tangible sign of a change in mentality towards the environment in Britain and it was rare, given that during the Victorian era, economic development was seen as an important factor of human progress. Common land, for example, was seen generally as waste land which, once developed, would become useful to the community. The CPS, on the other hand, saw the commons as representing the “lungs for the metropolis” (Ranlett 1983). From 1866 onwards, it managed to influence government legislation on open spaces in London, such as with the Metropolitan Commons Act (1866) which gave local authorities the power to protect the commons in their area with money from local taxes. It was also very successful in saving certain well-known open spaces such as Hampstead Heath, Wimbledon Common and Epping Forest. In 1882, it was joined by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MGPA) which concentrated on finding and converting derelict urban land “to provide breathing and resting places for the old and playgrounds for the young, especially in the east and south of London” (*ibid.*)⁵ In some respects, the MGPA could be seen as an attempt to bring the countryside into the towns, thereby foreseeing the “garden cities” that Ebenezer Howard would promote in the early 20th century.

The CPS and MGPA were, however, only the beginning of this Victorian environmentalist movement. It was soon joined by other groups which widened the scope of action. In 1876, for example, The Kryle Society was created, “dedicated to the promotion of beauty in all its forms” (*ibid.*), illustrating the aesthetic concerns of this first environmentalist wave. In a similar vein, the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public

⁴ Descriptions differ: Dwyer and Hodge (1996, 71) call the CPS a “preservation organisation”, Pepper, “the oldest national environment group” (1996, 218), and Marsh, “the first and foremost conservation body” (1982, 39). The CPS today goes under the name of The Open Spaces Society.

⁵ In 1884, the MGPA was instrumental in the passing of the 1884 Disused Burial Grounds Act which made it illegal to build on disused burial grounds.

Advertising (1893) was formed to try and reduce the invasion of advertising hoardings along the newly constructed railway lines and could be seen as an example of contemporary “quality of life” concerns.

The quality of Victorian life in the new urban areas was heavily impacted by the rise in the use of coal. “King Coal”, as it became known, powered the industrial revolution within the country and then around the world, illustrating popular identification of the national energy source with the imperial success of Britain. The English economist W.S. Jevons (1835–1882), for example, claimed that “the nation’s industrial and imperial ascendancy came not so much from hard work and sound government as from its coal” (Thorsheim 2006, 4). At the turn of the 20th century, production was so great, that some people even feared resource depletion, leading to national and imperial decline (Graham 1907, in Thorsheim 2006, 17).

However, the reliance of Britain on coal had serious environmental consequences. This seemingly obvious observation in the 21st century was anything but up to the mid-19th century when coal was considered, somewhat paradoxically, to be beneficial in health terms. This was because, since the Middle Ages, popular belief had held that the main cause of disease was miasma, a gas given off by decaying matter that created a noxious form of bad air. Coal smoke was perceived as a disinfectant to miasma because “[the] carbon and sulphur it contained were seen as fumigants that could neutralize miasma” (Thorsheim 2006, 17). It was only with the accumulation of medical evidence in the second half of the 19th century proving coal smoke was causing many respiratory illnesses and deaths and even damaging buildings (*i.e.* property) that coal burning became accepted, and redefined, as a major polluting source. The big urban centres such as London and Manchester were often covered by thick black clouds of soot which hung in the air for hours, days or even weeks, on end.⁶ Indeed, London became known for the intensity of its “pea soupers”, the dense “smogs”⁷ which blighted the life of its inhabitants, particularly between 1870 and 1900. According to the British environmental historian, I.G. Simmons, the frequency of these “thick and

⁶ “In 1914 an anonymous contributor to the British Medical Journal recalled ‘a winter [between the 1870s and 1890s] when there [had been] a veritable plague of darkness in London, the pall of fog hardly ever lifting during two to three weeks’.” (“Psychological effects of fog”, *British Medical Journal*, February 28, 1914, in Luckin 2002, 500)

⁷ Phrase coined by Dr. Henry Antoine Des Voeux in his 1905 paper, “Fog and Smoke”, for a meeting of the Public Health Congress.
http://environment.about.com/od/smogfaq/f/smog_faq_six.htm.

persistent London fogs . . . peaked in the 1890s [and], were clearly associated with smoke levels” (Simmons 2001, 151). The health effects of coal smoke were devastating, causing many premature deaths due to respiratory disease and as in most areas of 19th-century life in Britain, there was a very strong social class dimension. The blatant social injustice of the time was here reflected by an equally clear environmental injustice in that the lower classes were the first to suffer from this atmospheric pollution, as they still are today. A typical example was in Manchester when the Manchester Field Natural Society compared mortality rates in the wealthy suburbs with those in the slums of Ancoats (north Manchester). The evidence was compelling with three times as many people in Ancoats dying from pulmonary disease as in the suburbs (Table 1.1):

Table 1.1. Mortality rates in Ancoats and suburban districts

Pulmonary diseases			
Suburbs 1891	534	Suburbs 1892	429
Ancoats 1891	1,549	Ancoats 1892	1,116

Source: Platt 2002, 195–217.

The environmental horizon, therefore, for most urban people in 19th-century Britain was, often quite literally, very bleak. What was the reaction? From the authorities, very little was done as the environment took second place to the economy. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was the showcase of British industrial might and nothing should come in the way of promoting and spreading this message. Set against this imperial imperative, any socially and geographically localised pollution had little political significance. The dominant paradigm and discourse was that pollution was an unfortunate side-effect of industrialisation or, as *The Builder* magazine put it: “[The] persistent belief among many factory owners [was] that smoke was a ‘trophy of advancing trade’.”⁸

The relative lack of interest from Parliament didn’t deter the first British environmentalists from trying to improve urban living conditions in general and air quality in particular. National abatement groups such as the National Smoke Abatement Institution (NSAI 1882) and the Coal Smoke Abatement Society (CSAS 1898) along with regional ones such as the Manchester and Salford Noxious Vapours Abatement Association (MSNVAA 1876) were very active in bringing the problem to the

⁸ “The Smoke Nuisance”, *The Builder*, 12 August 1899, 143–145, in Thorsheim 2006, 50.

attention of decision makers. From their efforts, two solutions emerged, both of which reflected the attitudes towards who was to blame for the pollution. The first was to target the domestic users of coal and persuade them to voluntarily change their heating habits by means of more efficient technology. The second was to target industry and to compel them to reduce their emissions by means of regulation. The first, voluntary strategy was incarnated by the NSAI and most visible in the Smoke Abatement Exhibition of 1881.⁹ The second could be seen in the parliamentary lobbying of the CSAS, leading to different pieces of anti-smoke legislation in the following century, in particular the defining Act of 1956.¹⁰

For those people who wanted to get out of town to breathe the fresh country air, and who could afford to do so, there was another problem of access to the countryside, given that much non-cultivated land was not accessible to the public.¹¹ Even before the Victorian environmentalists appeared, there existed many ramblers clubs around the country (Table 1.2):

Table 1.2. Ramblers associations

1824	York Association for the Protection of Footpaths
1826	Manchester Association for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths
1856	Keswick and District Footpaths Association
	Burnley Footpath Committee
1866	Preston Footpath Association
1876	Hayfield and Kinder Scout Ancient Footpaths Association
1884	National Footpaths Preservation Society

⁹ This exhibition moved to Manchester the following year, under the control of the MSNVAA.

¹⁰ Clean Air Act 1956.

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1956/52/pdfs/ukpga_19560052_en.pdf. The 1956 legislation came in the wake of the 1952 London smog, believed to have killed up to 12,000 people. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/2545747.stm>.

¹¹ The MP for South Aberdeen was particularly active in this respect by leading a campaign to open up access to the Scottish mountains. He presented three Access to Mountains (Scotland) Bills (1884, 1888, 1892) and was followed by his son, Annan Bryce (MP, Inverness Burgh) who did likewise (1900, 1906, 1908), all of which were defeated. More widely, Wendy Joy Darby lists 26 failed parliamentary attempts to open up access to the mountains and the countryside in the UK between 1882-1996 (Darby 2000, 108–109). In 2000, success eventually came with The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW).

1894	Peak District and Northern Counties Footpaths Preservation Society Blackburn and District Ancient Footpaths Association Midland Institute of Ramblers
1900	Sheffield Clarion Ramblers

Source: Adapted from Darby 2000, 108–109.

These clubs were principally located in the North of England and often situated in areas close to big towns where there were hills to walk on, and later, to cycle on. They were a reflection of the desire and the need for the urban workers to get out of the insalubrious cities at the weekends but they often came up against a similarly strong desire on the part of the landowners to keep them off their property. In reality, the question of public access to land outside cities—and public access to green spaces in cities—was only one aspect of the wider question of political power in Britain. Up to the 19th century, the large landowning classes controlled the Parliament and had done so since the Barons forced King John to sign the Magna Carta in the 13th century (1215). In this context, the founder of the CPS, George John Shaw-Lefevre, “saw the fight for public access as a step towards the restoration of the land to the people” (Sutton 2000, 95). This was, perhaps, an exaggeration but, nevertheless, whilst campaigns for access to the countryside were ongoing, the parliamentary dominance—if not political power—of the landowning class was overturned (Table 1.3):

Table 1.3. Occupation of Members of Parliament

	1874	1880
Landowners, Rentiers	209	125
Army and Navy officers	116	86
Professional	157	167
Industrial, Commercial	157	259

Source: Read 1979, 152.

Conservationism¹² has long been an important strand of British environmentalism, illustrated as early as 1789 by the publication of Gilbert White’s famous *Natural History of Selbourne*. A century later, the founding of the Selbourne Society for the Protection of Birds, Plants and Pleasant Places (1885) was both a tribute to White’s ground-breaking

¹² Conservationism: “An approach to land management that emphasises the efficient conservation of natural resources so that they can later be developed for the benefit of society” (Carter 2001, xvii).