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HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT

THE RISE OF EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTALISM: A COSMOPOLITAN WAVE, 1865-1914

USPON EUROPSKOG ENVIRONMENTALIZMA: KOZMOPOLITANSKI VAL, 1865-1914.

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Summary

A new and stronger appreciation of nature in itself and - consequently - of its protection appears in the Western countries around the 1860s, first of all in the United States and in Great Britain. In the following decades this growing appreciation of nature contributes in many ways to the nation building process that is occurring in Europe but also on a global scale since the first half of the century. The most remarkable among the shared features of this convergence of new appreciation of nature and construction of national identities are three:

- *the way of choosing and conceptualizing the objects of nature to promote and protect (mainly landscapes and natural monuments),*
- *the influence of arts and literature on the process and*
- *the very active role of associations.*

Beside these »universal« features it is possible to recognize several national or regional specificities proceeding from the peculiar blends of cultural traditions, political strategies and socio-economic situations each country or region produced. The paper will address this process from a comparative point of view, highlighting both the national and the transnational manifestations of environmentalism development from the 1860s to the First World War.

Key words: environmentalism, appreciation of nature, 19th century

Ključne riječi: environmentalizam, uvažavanje prirode, 19. stoljeće

THE BIRTH OF MODERN ENVIRONMENTALISM

We have long known that it is possible to trace back to very remote periods some modern forms of appreciation towards nature, some sophisticated reflections about the man-nature relationship and even some complex measures of nature protection, both in the West and in other areas of the world.

Anyway, I think that it is possible to speak in terms of »modern environmentalism« only since the middle of the Nineteenth century. Indeed, when I speak of »modern environmentalism« I mean the simultaneous presence of four elements:

1. a positive attitude towards nature as such, and an inclination to preserve it or at least some of its aspects;
2. a system of rational arguments designed to justify this attitude;
3. a series of concrete objectives that could be also articulated in wide-ranging programmes;
4. the desire and the capacity to realize some form of collective organization in order to achieve these goals.

Those four elements can combine in different forms, producing in this way currents and organizations extremely variegated and sometimes opposed¹, but in spite of this, the difference from the former historical periods seems to me very deep and clear.

It seems quite clear that modern environmentalism (as defined below) matures from the beginning of the 1860s and attains a transnational dimension in about thirty years. A comparison of several national stories indicates indeed how a transnational debate starts flourishing at the beginning of the 1890s and how in the same period the ideas and practices of environmentalism spread in more and more countries.

Let's have a quick look at some dates.

Though it is destined to remain isolated and little known among its contemporaries, the first book to inquire into the historical responsibilities of man in the environmental deterioration at a global scale - *Man and Nature* by George Perkin Marsh - is published in 1864². We can trace back to the same year the beginning of the protected areas history, with the creation of the natural park of the Yosemite Valley³. The first national park - Yellowstone - is created only eight years later, in the United States too.

1865 is a very important year for England as well.

Here - at the end of a long period in which a lot of local societies have been founded - the *Commons Preservation Society* is created as the first national environmental association. This event inaugurates an extraordinary phase of activism that gives birth to societies such as the *Kyrle Society*, ancestor of the *National Trust*, the *English Lake District Association*, the *National Smoke Abatement Society*, the *National Footpaths Preservation Society*, the *Selborn League for the Preservation of Birds, Plants and Pleasant Places* and the very successful *Society for the Protection of Birds*. In the same years appear anti-pollution laws, those for the creation of urban parks, for the open access to the countryside, for the protection of monuments and wild fauna. Among the latter, very important for its precocity and innovativeness is the *Sea Birds Preservation Act* of 1869⁴.

This English protectionist wave is indeed very precocious. When it breaks out during the 1870s⁵, in the United States and in continental Europe the same phenomenon takes place only from the beginning of the 1890s and culminates just before the First World War. In the United States, for example, the two main environmentalist currents get organized only during this decade: John Muir founds the first national

¹ For a theoretical approach see John S. DRYZEK, *The Politics of the Earth. Environmental Discourses*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; for an historical approach see David PEPPER, *Modern Environmentalism. An Introduction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996.

² George P. MARSH, *Man and Nature: Or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, New York, Scribner, 1864, reprinted in 2003 at Seattle by University of Washington Press with an introduction of David Lowenthal and a foreword by William Cronon. Lowenthal is also the author of *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2000.

³ Alfred RUNTE, *National Parks. The American Experience*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1997, 29-34.

⁴ A recent and very detailed account of the English environmental movement's birth is in Charles-François MATHIS, *In Nature We Trust. Les paysages anglais à l'ère industrielle*, Paris, Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2010.

⁵ MATHIS, *In Nature We Trust*, cit., chapter IV.

preservationist association - the *Sierra Club* - in 1892 while Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt start to develop the *Progressive Conservation Movement* just before the turn of century⁶.

In Europe the timing is more or less the same.

One of the first environmental associations is actually the Swiss *Association pour la protection des plantes*, founded in 1883 by the famous botanist Henri Correvon, but on the Continent the 1880s are more characterized by the diffusion of environmentalist ideas than by the birth of associations or by the promulgation of laws. In 1880, for example, is published in Germany the remarkable essay by Ernst Rudorff »On the relationship of Modern Life to Nature«⁷ and in the following years the scholars of the *Società Botanica italiana* intervene several times on environmental issues⁸. In spite of all these events, modern environmentalism rises in Europe only during the 1890s. It is in this decade that many of the most important European tourist societies arise and in their wake several national societies for the protection of monuments, landscapes and nature in general are created⁹. The Belgian association *Société nationale pour la protection des sites et des monuments* (1892), the Italian *Pro Montibus et Silvis* (1897) and the German *Bund für Vogelschutz* (1899) are good examples of this.

In the following fifteen years the initiatives increase, become more rich and complex, connect themselves beyond the national borders and in many cases are able to attain important results until the war freezes a seemingly unstoppable development.

To put it briefly, modern environmentalism imposes itself in England in the 1870s and spreads to the other western countries from the beginning of the 1890s. After an exceptional blossoming in the first years of the new century the movement experiences a standstill as a consequence of the First World War, recovering its strength only after the Second World War¹⁰. At that date, in fact, ecological concerns will take the centre of the stage, and the care for landscape and for natural monuments will be relegated to the background and often completely ignored.

The rise and the global success of this new environmentalist attitude, largely mainstream today, requires that we single out and clarify in a better way the features of late nineteenth-century environmentalism as a particular form of modern environmentalism. An environmentalism presenting all sorts of different projects that do however share a sound, heritage-centred approach¹¹.

But what do we mean when we speak of a heritage-centred approach?

To explain this concept it is first necessary to look into the connections between nationalism, nation building and heritage.

⁶ A short but well documented account of the American environmentalism's rise is in the seventh chapter (»Conservation and Preservation 1785-1950«) of Carolyn MERCHANT, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.

⁷ Ernst RUDORFF, »Ueber das Verhältniss des modernen Lebens zur Natur«, »Preußische Jahrbücher«, n. 45, 261-277 (reprinted in »Natur und Landschaft«, 1990, n. 66).

⁸ Franco PEDROTTI (ed.), *La Società Botanica Italiana per la protezione della natura*, Camerino, Università degli Studi di Camerino, 1992.

⁹ Luigi PICCIONI, *Il volto amato della patria. Il primo movimento per la protezione della natura in Italia*, Camerino, Università degli Studi di Camerino, 1999 (2nd edition 2014), chapters third and eighth. The main lines of this book are resumed in Luigi PICCIONI, »Protectionism and the protection of nature in Italy over the end of nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries«, in *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, edited by Marco ARMIERO and Marcus HALL, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2010, 251-268.

¹⁰ After 1945, in particular, the environmental dialogue and cooperation among states and among associations resume, well beyond the levels attained in the first years of the century. A turning point is the creation, in 1948, of the International Union for Nature Protection (Uipn), then International Union for Nature Conservation (Uicn). On the »environmental diplomacy« in these years, see Anna-Katharina WÖBSE, *Weltnaturschutz. Umweltdiplomatie in Völkerbund und Vereinten Nationen 1920-1950*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2012; on UICN, see Martin HOLDGATE, *The Green Web. A Union for World Conservation*, London, Earthscan, 1999.

¹¹ This doesn't mean that the movement lacks visions or project inspired by sound ecological concerns or visions. The initiatives and publications of scientific societies and scientists such as Jean Massart or Hugo Conwentz are good examples of this. Almost everywhere, however, the »ecological« rationale for nature protection is tightly intertwined with the »literary« and »patriotic« ones and in a subordinate position to them. A remarkable exception seems to be the Belgian case, according to the fine analysis of Raf DE BONT and Rajesh HEYNICKX in the article »Landscapes of Nostalgia: Life Scientists and Literary Intellectuals Protecting Belgium's 'Wilderness', 1900-1940«, »Environment and History«, XVIII (2012), 237-260.

NATION BUILDING PROCESS, HERITAGE GOODS, NATURE

At least since the beginning of the 1980s, many historians, geographers, anthropologists and sociologists have dedicated themselves to the study of the »nation building« process and of the role played in it by the nationalistic ideologies. Between 1976 and 1991 the pioneering works by scholars such as Weber, Hobsbawm, Löfgren and Anderson¹² have given a great contribution to this historiographical debate, that has become very rich and complex.

Most of these scholars have pointed out that the creation of modern states - no longer based on the traditional forms of legitimization that were typical of the *ancien régime* - required a primarily symbolic process of reconstruction of the social body in which the concept of nation played a decisive role. In short, the creation of a national community - a community of men and women thinking of themselves as French, German or British citizens rather than anything else - became a strategic objective common to all nineteenth-century western bourgeoisies, whether they belonged to already extant states or aspired to the creation of new ones.

It is common knowledge that the same strategies were adopted almost everywhere to achieve this objective. The national community was mainly created by the imposition of a shared identity constructed by determining the contents of a national heritage and by popularizing the desire to worship them. This led to the characteristic paradox that the process of the formation of national identities that were supposed to be unique, never to be repeated, and frequently conceived as being spiritually superior was in actual fact one of the most widespread and standardized processes in the entire history of the western world.

Through elitist channels such as the press and political debate but also through more popular channels such as military service and compulsory education, several elements of national identity are suggested and successively imposed. As Orvar Löfgren explains in his seminal article, this peculiar wealth of each nation is an ever different combination of practically unchanging basic elements: official representations such as a national anthem, a flag, a language, a mentality, a common history, heroes, sacred places, monuments, folklore, a landscape, and a number of picturesque identifications (dress, food, totemic symbols)¹³.

This way of defining the contents of a national heritage - that is what the ancestors and founders of the nation have left behind, or what the historical process has sedimented on the native soil, or what the national genius has produced - soon also leads to considerations of the problem of safeguarding its component elements, above all its monuments and works of art. It is also well known that the first country to consciously adopt an organic policy directed towards preserving its artistic and monumental heritage has been revolutionary France¹⁴, even if the full development of protective policies doesn't become apparent until the second half of the nineteenth century, precisely when the leading western countries are completing the process of nation building and institutionalizing nationalist ideology.

According to several scholars, during the nineteenth century nationalism imposes itself in the whole western world by going through three stages: a cultural one, in which ideas and projects were consolidate; a political one, when dynamic minorities begin to promote nationalistic programmes and an institutional one, in which these minorities gain a large popular consensus and are able to set up political structures aimed at nation building¹⁵. Though these stages follow one another at different paces and with different modalities according to the local situations, the second half of the nineteenth century can be considered the age in which most of the western countries experience the institutionalization of nationalism. Moreover, during this age nationalism becomes the powerful ideological tool lying at the basis of the imperialist adventure and of the First World War.

¹² Eugen WEBER, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, Redwood City (Ca), Stanford University Press, 1976; Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, London-New York, Verso, 1982; Orvar LÖFGREN, »The Nationalization of Cultures«, »Ethnologia Europaea«, XIX (1989), 1, 5-24; Eric HOBSBAWM, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

¹³ O. LÖFGREN, »The Nationalization of Cultures«, cit.

¹⁴ Dominique POULOT, *Musée nation patrimoine 1789-1815*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.

¹⁵ Miroslav HROCH, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

NATION BUILDING AND THE FIRST ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

As far as we are concerned, it is interesting to point out how the late nineteenth century emergence of preoccupation about safeguarding the environment coincides with the period when the process of nation building is at its height. The coinciding of these two phenomena leaves a profound mark on the conceptual framework, values, goals, and achievements of early environmentalism, long influencing its character¹⁶.

This is why the requests that begins to be made for environment protection is mainly heritage- and nation-centred, with the result that the protection of nature is primarily interpreted as the protection of »objects« - including large, complex objects - that seem to merit such treatment because they are a constitutive element of a nation's heritage and because, in the eyes of the general population, they represent a source of identification and inspiration. The prime aim of most of the associations, movements, and individuals thus becomes a drive to have these natural objects put on the list of »national assets« in order to entitle them to protection. This seems to me the most characteristic feature of the first phase of the environmentalist movement and it also ensures that the first laws on the protection of nature - most of them passed between 1902 and 1911 with reference to prior legislation on the protection of artistic and monumental heritage - are mainly those that look upon natural scenery and natural monuments as basic elements of a country's identity and therefore of its national heritage. The ground-breaking French law, passed in 1906 after years of intense debate, doesn't in fact protect the landscape or monuments of nature *per se* but only if they possessed »artistic quality«.

Another shared feature of the heritage- and nation-centred vision is the centrality of landscape. In the last decades many researches have highlighted the importance of the landscape and of the concept of landscape in defining national identities. Historians, geographers, anthropologists and sociologists have dealt with the topic producing highly valuable works such as the books written by Simon Schama, Kenneth Olwig, Christopher Ely, Thomas Lekan and François Walter¹⁷. Even when they did not know these research works, the historians of nationalism have often been aware of the importance of landscape as a constitutive element of the heritage¹⁸.

This is the reason why a great part of the early environmental laws protect landscapes, considered as a nation's sacred places, as peculiar expressions of the country's exceptionality or as visual synthesis of the spirit and the history of a people. Besides the landscape protection another issue is at the centre of the law making process: the protection of vast territories by means of national parks.

In fact, the creation of the first protected areas, both in the United States and in Europe, also has to be understood primarily in the nationalistic context. The historians have pointed out how the institution of the American national parks is stimulated both by the lobbying of big tourist and transportation industries and by the firm belief that the imposing and spectacular western landscapes could take the place of those historical monuments, inherited from an ancient past, that the people of the United States - differently from Europeans - did not have at their disposal.

According to Alfred Runte¹⁹:

When national parks were first established, protection of the environment as now defined was the last preservationists' aim. Rather America's incentive for the national park idea lay in the persistence of a

¹⁶ On this topic see the important work of François WALTER, *Les figures paysagères de la nation. Territoire et paysage en Europe (16e-20e siècle)*, Paris, Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2004, especially the sixth chapter, »La mobilisation politique des analogies paysagères«. The German case, in particular, has been widely researched and one of the most eloquent books in this field is Thomas M. LEKAN, *Imagining the nation in nature. Landscape preservation and German Identity 1885-1945*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2004.

¹⁷ Simon SCHAMA, *Landscape and Memory*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995; Kenneth Robert OLWIG, *Landscape Nature and the Body Politic. From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002; Christopher ELY, *This Meager Nature. Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 2002; T. M. LEKAN, *Imagining the Nation in Nature*, cit.; F. WALTER, *Les figures paysagères de la nation*, cit.

¹⁸ A good example of this is the ninth chapter (»La nation comme horizon«) of Anne-Marie THIESSE, *La création des identités nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 2001.

¹⁹ A. RUNTE, *National Parks*, cit., 8 and 12.

painfully felt desire for time-honored traditions in the United States. [...] In the West the United States had one final opportunity to protect a truly convincing semblance of historical continuity through landscape.

In Europe, even though with a delay of some decades, things go more or less the same way. Tom Mels²⁰ has studied the genesis of the first European national parks, created in Sweden in 1909, and has observed:

Whereas in the Swedish debate several alternatives to the term national park were considered, neither nature park, state park, protected park, nor protected land would clearly enough reflect the underlying aim of conservation. Obviously, the term national park had already enjoyed some international adoption due to the American example. But more importantly, it suggested »that the aim of park establishment is ... to create an object for patriotism«.

On the other hand, the words of the Swedish legislator are strikingly similar to the ones used by the great Italian botanist Romualdo Pirrotta who in 1917, after having expounded the ecological reasons for the creation of the first Italian national park, concludes²¹:

It is necessary that all those who appreciate the beauty of nature contribute to the creation of the means to preserve - as it has already been possible for the historical and art monuments - this wonderful monument, whose intactness testifies to our natural beauties, landscapes and fauna. To participate in this work of rescue, protection, conservation of this national patrimony made of beauty, art and science means to accomplish an enterprise that is at the same time civic, patriotic and worthy of a great country. A country that has been in the forefront of world civilization, that wants to be there again, and that - if it wants - will be there again.

One final element contributes to the systemic character of the relationship between early environmentalism and nationalism: the constant flow of information, ideas, and stimulating thought that streamed across national boundaries.

The spread of associationism, the proposed protected areas, and other protective measures were indeed a response to primarily national realities but at the same time they were the fruit of comparative studies, of exchanges of information on an international level, of meetings between public officials and scholars from different nations. Most of the European publications about landscape and natural monument protection contain chapters - or at least large sections - consecrated to the description of the environmental movements and laws of other countries. In Italy, it is the case of a long article published by the ministerial official Luigi Parpagliolo in 1905 and overall of the wide-ranging book published in 1914 by the lawyer A. N. Falcone²². And it is no coincidence that at this moment in history, possibly even more than in later decades, European protectionism could boast some universally recognized international leaders, such as Henri Correvon, Paul Sarasin, Jean Massart, and, above all, Hugo Wilhelm Conwentz, the author of a seminal work published in 1904 and successively translated into English²³.

Lastly, the character of the protectionism advocated by the most organic, most aware, most influential, and best organized movement in those years was essentially national and heritage-centred: this was the *Heimatschutzbund* of the German-speaking countries²⁴. The movement emerges in Germany at the beginning of the 1880s on the basis of the theories expounded by Ernst Rudorff in its famous article »On the relationship of Modern Life to Nature« and becomes established as a national association in 1904

²⁰ Tom MELS, *Wild Landscapes. The Cultural Nature of Swedish National Parks*, Lund, Lund University Press, 1999, p. 70.

²¹ Pietro Romualdo PIROTTA, *Il Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo*, Roma, Federazione italiana delle associazioni Pro Montibus ed enti affini, 1917, 29-30.

²² Luigi PARPAGLILOLO, »La protezione del paesaggio«, »Fanfulla della domenica«, XXVII (1905), n. 36, 2-3; n. 37, 2-3; Antonio Nicola FALCONE, *Il paesaggio italico e la sua difesa. Studio giuridico-estetico*, Firenze, Alinari, 1914.

²³ Hugo Wilhelm CONWENTZ, *The Care of Natural Monuments, with Special Reference to Great Britain and Germany*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1909 (first German edition Berlin 1904). On Conwentz see the biography by Albrecht MILNIK, *Hugo Conwentz - Klassiker des Naturschutzes. Sein Waldweg zum Naturschutz*, Kessel, Remagen-Oberwinter, 2006. An historical assessment on the relevance of the book in the European context is in F. WALTER, *Les figures paysagerès de la nation*, cit., 258-260.

²⁴ William ROLLINS, *A Greener Vision of Home. Cultural Politics and Environmental Reform in the German Heimatschutz Movement*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

soon achieving a great success not only at home (30.000 members in 1914), but also abroad. Indeed, since the *Bund* rises in an extremely dynamic period for the European protectionism and can profit from the international fame of Hugo Conwentz, in Austria and Switzerland similar organizations are soon created, when in other countries many associations are influenced by its philosophy and methods.

Actually, the *Heimatschutz* movement is not precisely nationalist since its main focus is the regional or the local scale. The *Heimat* as it was conceived by Rudorff and its followers does not coincide with the *Vaterland*, though the two concepts are not mutually exclusive and the *Bund* operates at a national scale. But what is important for us is that the *Heimatschutz* movement is very clearly heritage-centered. It's worth noting that the main objective of the German *Bund* was to protect »the natural and historically developed uniqueness of the German homeland«²⁵. In this sense, the *Heimatschutz* movement exemplified the leading cultural trends of European protectionism in the twenty-year period 1890-1910, drawing heavily on the lesson of John Ruskin and William Morris²⁶. The *Heimatschutz* movement stands out precisely due to the desire to protect *at the same time* the historic and the artistic heritage, the landscape, the natural monuments and the folklore, being all considered as pillars of the local and national identity threatened by modernization.

But the *Heimatschutz* is not only a highly self-conscious movement, strong, organized and visible well beyond the national borders. Differently from the English environmental movement - the oldest in Europe and in any case very important - since its early period it has such close connections with the public authorities to impose a Prussian law in 1902 against the desfigurement of towns and landscapes. This law will be updated in 1907 and in the same year it will be imitated by an English law on the same subject²⁷.

In spite of its national and often local character, the *Heimatschutz* movement best exemplifies the leading cultural trends of European protectionism in the crucial period 1890-1914, drawing heavily on the lesson of John Ruskin and William Morris. The *Heimatschutz* movement stands out precisely due to the desire to protect *at the same time* the historic and the artistic heritage, the landscape, the natural monuments and the folklore, being all considered as pillars of the local and national identity threatened by modernization.

SUMMARY

A new and stronger appreciation of nature in itself and - consequently - of its protection appears in the Western countries around the 1860s, first of all in the United States and in Great Britain. In the following decades this growing appreciation of nature contributes in many ways to the nation building process that is occurring in Europe but also on a global scale since the first half of the century. The most remarkable among the shared features of this convergence of new appreciation of nature and construction of national identities are three: 1) the way of choosing and conceptualizing the objects of nature to promote and protect (mainly landscapes and natural monuments); 2) the influence of arts and literature on the process and; 3) the very active role of associations. Beside these »universal« features it is possible to recognize several national or regional specificities proceeding from the peculiar blends of cultural traditions, political strategies and socio-economic situations each country or region produced. The article addresses this process from a comparative point of view, highlighting both the national and the transnational manifestations of environmentalism development from the 1860s to the First World War.

²⁵ William ROLLINS, »*Heimat*, Modernity and Nation in the Early *Heimatschutz* Movement«, in Jost HERMAND, James STEAKLEY (edd.), *Heimat, Nation, Fatherland: the German Sense of Belonging*, New York-Washington, Peter Lang, 1996, 95.

²⁶ W. ROLLINS, *A Greener Vision of Home*, cit., 58.

²⁷ W. ROLLINS, *A Greener Vision of Home*, cit., 66.

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