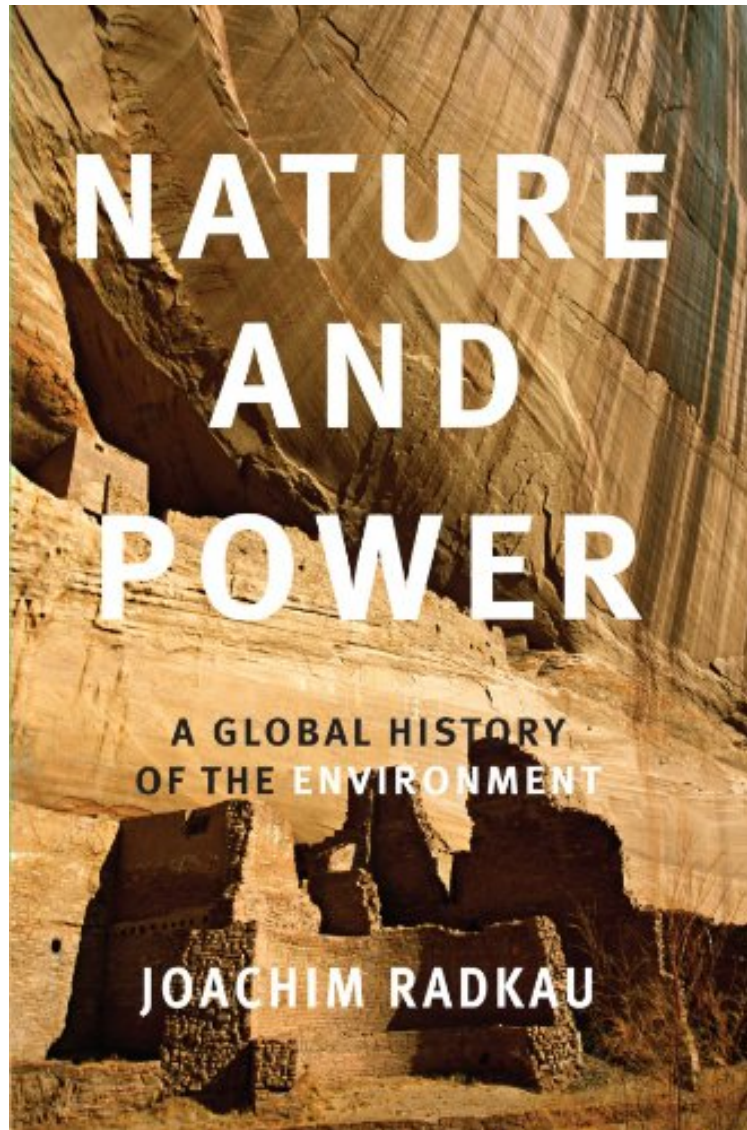


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## Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment (Publications of the German Historical Institute)

*Joachim Radkau*

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**Joachim Radkau : Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment (Publications of the German Historical Institute)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment (Publications of the German Historical Institute):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. great book By Student123 This is one of my favorite history books of

all time. I can recommend this to anyone with a predilection for ecological studies or marxian analysis. 10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Prizewinning historical review of global environmental history - and indirect insights on reader interests. By Frank T. Manheim This volume, recipient of the World History Association book prize for 2009, is an English translation of "Mensch und Natur in die Geschichte", published in Leipzig in 2002. The author, Joachim Radkau, is a German historian who doesn't do small stuff - subjects with less than historical and holistic comprehensiveness. A selection of his previous books include "German Industry and Politics from Bismarck to Today" (1974); "Wood - a Natural Raw Material" (1989), and "Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment" (2000). I'm a policy researcher trying to make sense of U.S. environmental and regulatory policy. Radkau's book and insights amply repay study for its relevance to international perspectives on today's environmental issues. It could be useful to academic and policy researchers, advanced students, environmentalists, industry leaders, politicians and policymakers, as well as historians. Yet, there was not a single prior review of Radkau's book prior to my effort. In contrast, Thomas Friedman's "The Earth is Flat" has 1079 reviews. Friedman, a well-known columnist for the NY Times, is a knowledgeable and skilled writer. But is his book 1000 times more useful or insightful than Radkau's book? Friedman offers new observations and ideas about the issues of the moment - that tend to be dated by the time a new book arrives. This contrast in reader interests brings to my mind a somewhat parallel assessment by a highly-regarded observer about America, Alexis De Tocqueville. In his famous book, "Democracy in America" (1835), the young French nobleman reported often-quoted flattering examples of "American Exceptionalism", i.e., national characteristics not found in the countries from which immigrants to America originally came. But he also identified "negative exceptionalisms". He apologized for talking about flaws in American culture, but explained that he thought Americans needed to know about them. One of De T.'s first observations after getting off the boat from France was the poor quality of American politicians - compared to the positive values he found in citizens. But he later described in detail the reason - the tendency of American voters to avoid leaders with vision and sound judgment. They preferred politicians who served their local needs, told them what they wanted to hear, and were colorful and charismatic. Ring any bells for today? He also reported that Americans tended to be superficial and "now" oriented in their preoccupations, paying little attention to authority or wisdom from the past. Saving grace: in times of crisis, Americans did accept statesmen. But let's get back to Radkau. He has an astounding command of detail about obscure past history but places both it and modern developments in interesting perspective, and generally avoids putting on nationalistic blinders. For example, Radkau reveals not only American ignorance of European and other environmental history, but also European scientists' ignorance of American environmental pioneers and history. To a German scientist who asked "who is Rachel Carson", Radkau replied that Carson was to the American environmental movement as Joan of Arc was to French nationalism. Radkau went on to note that "the 1980 Global 2000 report to the American President, translated into a 1,508 page affordable German edition, became a bestseller and the Bible of the German environmental movement." Radkau points out that leading American textbooks of environmental history like those of Caroline Merchant (in the 1990s) had no entry on the Chernobyl nuclear accident. In contrast, this "catastrophic accident at the Soviet nuclear power plant in April 1986" was for a time regarded in parts of Europe as the most important event in environmental history of modern time. Among other things, it led to Sweden's decision to phase out its nuclear power facilities (a decision recently rescinded). Radkau offers plenty of evidence about "how little the environmental movements of various countries know about each other, even when thinking 'globally'". In his introduction to the English edition Radkau points to the important influence of Britain's vast colonial empire and the early American perception of unlimited land and personal potentials on British and American attitudes. The American "everything is possible" attitude and tendency to go to extremes contrasts with attitudes in continental Europe. Awareness of "limits to growth" was long present in Germany. Forest administrations "elevated sustainability into a doctrine in the 18th Century". Recent American environmentalists from John Muir and Aldo Leopold to the present have come down hard on deer, sheep (John Muir called them a "hoofed locust") and goats, whose omnivorous browsing prevents replenishment of forests. But Radkau notes the value of sheep and goats to many cultures and points out the 3000 year history of the Luneburg heath in criticizing the idea that only trees, forests, and their ecosystems and animal populations have value. There are few nations, cultures, or ecological phenomena that Radkau does not seem to have included in his research, whether Mongolia, Bhutan, Canada, Malaria, irrigation, mining, forest clearing, the cult of dung, the "holy" nature movement, industrial environmental crisis, problems associated with tourism, and space flight. He places an especial emphasis on nuclear energy but goes remarkably light on global climate change- the biggest gap in his book. He could make a great contribution if he brought his background and omnidirectional approach to a future volume on this subject. 5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Often too theoretical, this book nonetheless is an impressive work of environmental history. By Nathan B "Nature and Power" is not for the faint of heart, it is very dense, both in terms of the amount of text per page and in its conceptualizations. Throughout the text Radkau spends significant amounts of time discussing the historiography of environmental history and the intellectual history of environmentalism. The first chapter in particular says virtually nothing of substance (e.g. changing water levels in Denmark or rate of deforestation), but rather deals entirely with how we think about environmentalism. While I found it mind numbing, someone else might really appreciate it. But there is plenty of

substance to be had. One problem Radkau faces is that he tends to avoid the apocalyptic predictions of environmentalists, instead offering a balanced, nuanced view that can easily be lost in translation (so to speak, this is after all a literal translation as well, and a good one at that) -- but his environmentalist peers do not appreciate this nuance, and the anti-environmentalists are too prone to claim his as their own. Towards the end of the book Radkau tells about how a radio show used his book to claim that there are no environmental problems to be overly worried about. This clearly is not the case. Radkau simply points out that struggles with sustainability are not new, and that apocalyptic predictions tend to fall short (thankfully). As problems become manifest, human attention is diverted to them. It is environmental problems that are masked that cause the most trouble. Humanity appears to have begun its history with wasteful use of resources. Slash and burn agriculture, where forests are burned down, and the ash used as a short term fertilizer, was the norm for many years. When humans were few and land was plenty that was generally fine. When Americans first came to America, and through the 19th century, land was so plentiful that it was often cheaper to use the land and then move on rather than fertilize and replenish it. Mining, fishing, and other activities have all variously caused ecological pressure. This is a recurring theme: while we view conservation as a contemporary issue, it is not. Which raises the issue: what to conserve? Radkau raises some thorny issues. Why is it that larger, cuter animals like seals or elephants are more popular than salmon or insects. And why is it that goats should be valued over the forests that they can overgraze if not watched? Why is one life more valuable than another? And in helping one, ecological damage can occur elsewhere. Radkau notes that planting trees is a popular "green" thing to do. But the importation of the Australian Eucalyptis to Portugal has exasperated water shortages due to its high water use. Dams avoided the use of fossil fuels, but damaged fish stocks and killed rivers. Wind farms kill birds, pitting bird conservationists against alternative fuel proponents. As Radkau notes, environmental movements have expended a great deal of energy in internal controversies, but it is not hard to see why. While environmentalists often tote the "natural," what is natural also seems a relevant question to Radkau. One of the sections of his books deals with husbandry and gardening - both largely ignored in environmental history. According to Radkau, domestication was one of the great acts of conservation. Instead of hunting and depleting stocks, domestication allowed for sustainable protein. But a lamb is no less alive than a faun. Gardens, too, represent a conservation of a kind - and are at least worth conserving. Radkau does not address this, but man-made lakes such as the Salton Sea at the end of the Colorado River are now the locus of conservation efforts - created during the New Deal when they diverted the Colorado River for a time to do hydraulic work on the river, it is now an important stopping spot for migratory fowl. But it is man-made. Does the fact that man made it rather than a beaver make it less natural? Nature adapts and changes itself as well. Who is best to do the conserving? Some argue for the state. The Soviet State, with all its power, drained the Aral sea and caused massive desertification in central Asia. By contrast, the United States federal government, beginning with the Republican Theodore Roosevelt, initiated massive land conservation. But FDR radically altered the landscape through the Tennessee River Valley authority (which did have many beneficial effects, and pulled the south from poverty), and under the new deal dams were put up all over the country at an alarming rate. Many rivers were forever changed. Small holders, too, have a mixed record. In Germany (Radkau's homeland), forests were best preserved when they were utilized for grazing acorns (from Oak). Across Europe this was the case - the peasants depended on the forests, so they preserved them, and pruned out coniferous trees in favor of deciduous trees. In the Aegean island of Greece, the forests that survived best were the ones that were needed for their ships: fine wood of the right size and shape were essential. Usage creates the need to preserve. Organizations do not solve problems, people do. Organizations that are full of people who don't care about the environment, or have different goals, will have different outcomes from organizations full of people that do care. The type of organization appears to matter quite a bit less. Radkau does point out, though, that heavy handed intervention that alienates locals will generally fail. As he notes several times, an old German saying says "you can't have a policeman by every tree." In some cases governments have antagonized locals, and made locals hate the environmental movement by removing traditional rights, that as noted above actually go a long ways towards conservation. Radkau points out that rich western environmentalists advocate against tropical rainforest clearing, but don't say anything when temperate forests are cut down for development. Radkau advocates for simple rules and against excessive regulatory regimes for maximum effect. Overall this is an impressive work, but I kept wishing for more detail, more nuts and bolts so to speak, and a lot less theorizing and conceptualizing. The same amount of time spent elsewhere would yield more useful information about the natural world. At the same time, this is an impressively broad work; Radkau seems eminently reasonable, and he raises fascinating questions. 3.5 stars. If you read one work on environmental issues, I strongly recommend *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (Global Century Series) as you will learn a lot more, with more enjoyment and in less time. If you want to learn about water issues, I recommend the extremely readable book *Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It*. Still, this book is worth a read if you will read several books on the subject.

*Nature and Power* traces the expanding scope of environmental action over the course of history: from initiatives undertaken by individual villages and cities, environmental policy has become a global concern. Efforts to steer human

use of nature and natural resources have become complicated, as *Nature and Power* shows, by particularities of culture and by the vagaries of human nature itself. Environmental history, the author argues, is ultimately the history of human hopes and fears.

"Joachim Radkau's *Nature and Power* offers the best overview of world environmental history available in the English language. Radkau has an independent cast of mind and an uncanny ability to focus on the 'hot' topics in the global environmental field. His perspective is always fresh and insightful, even when he is taking the reader down well-trodden paths." - Mark Cioc, University of California, Santa Cruz "Americans may have invented the field of environmental history, but today some of the most ambitious work is coming from outside the country, offering provocative new approaches and perspectives. Joachim Radkau joins that international band of innovative historians with this extraordinary work of global synthesis. It is bold, opinionated, and important." - Donald Worster, University of Kansas "...an indispensable addition to library collections on environmental history. Essential." -Choice "A review like this cannot do justice to the richness of Radkau's account of world environmental history. And it is perhaps the richness, the diversity, and the complexity of this account that will be this book's most important legacy to world environmental history." - David Christian "Radkau has crafted a book of extraordinary scope by building on regional environmental histories as well as earlier world histories...Thomas Dunlap translated *Nature and Power* for this English edition, and his translation is virtually flawless, providing exquisite prose that never reveals that the ideas originated in a different language." *World History Bulletin*, Kim Little, University of Central Arkansas About the Author Joachim Radkau is Associate Professor of History at Universitt Bielefeld in Germany. His books include *Deutsche Industrie und Politik von Bismarck bis zur Gegenwart* (1974). *Holz: Ein Naturstoff in der Technikgeschichte* (in collaboration with Ingrid Schfer, 1987), *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (1998), and the biography of Max Weber, *Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* (2005).