

Martin Reuss/Stephen H. Cutcliffe (Hrsg.), *The Illusory Boundary. Environment and Technology in History*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville/London 2010, 328 S., kart., 29,50 \$, auch als E-Book.

There is an old joke among environmental biologists. Given the situation of two people facing a charging rhinoceros in the African veldt, the advantage for survival lies not in the faster runner but in the one with the keys to the Jeep. Such is the situation with humanity in general, a species whose biological and social development is intimately and universally linked with the use of external technology adapted to the situation at hand. However, most popular environmentalist literature posits a divide between nature and technology. One either espouses a "natural" environmental state, with the perception that technology has permanently damaged nature, or one promotes the benefit of technology to improve a natural state hostile to human progress.

The premise put forward in the series of essays presented by Martin Reuss and Stephen H. Cutcliffe in "The Illusory Boundary" is that there is far less separation between "natural" human environmental and technological histories than believed in traditional historical view. This emerging philosophy of "Envirotech" challenges the long-held view that environment and technology should be seen as opposing actors in human history. The book's title reflects the dual central ideas that there is no sharp division between environment and technology, and that any separation of the two states is a permeable situation allowing crossovers without damaging either aspect. The essays are the result of conversations held at the University of Maryland (USA) in June 2006. The editors note that the two most influential anthologies of the historic nature/culture interface prior to this volume were the results of similar conversations at sponsored seminars.

"Illusory Boundary" is less interested in breaking new ground as in providing readers with provocative but solidly backed methodological approaches to the study of "Envirotech". The contributions suggest or imply that historians' approaches to the environment have been impacted by the rationalistic and mechanistic philosophies that accompanied modernity in the wake of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. The scientific discoveries in natural history were grounded in a view that man was unique in nature, transcending nature and charged with transformation of landscape to social and profitable needs. Thus, technology came to be seen as the civilising force against the natural state, setting up a false dichotomy between human society and the natural environment. Under the veil of rationality, nature became an area for objective scientific study as an artefact. Historians in particular were slow to accept that history could not be studied aloof from the biological and environmental agencies that contributed to human understandings of nature.

As in any young field, there are a variety of approaches to the study of "Envirotech". Some, like James Williams, approach the subject as a complicated interface between nature and humanity, arguing that we cannot understand the "technology junction" without admitting that the social constructions of technology and nature have a cultural bias and thus are equally "illusory". He envisions the human relationship with the environment as a patchwork quilt of dynamic and complex interconnected outcomes of the human/nature/technology interface on the human-constructed landscape.

Joy Parr, on the other hand, internalises “Envirotech” with an intriguing suggestion that our bodies learn from interaction with the environment and technology through sensation, acquiring the embodied knowledge that gives comfort in specific environs and tasks. While the approach is in some ways Lamarckian in its suggestion that human bodies develop internalised sensitivities to certain environments, it sets the stage for further investigation into the human/nature interface at the level of individual experience.

Peter Coates suggests that the boundary between nature and technology is especially flimsy when one examines how many axioms of technology have been adapted from natural examples as simple as the web like structure of the giant lily or as complex as the natural Velcro effects of burrs. Joel Tarr looks at the city, an entity excoriated in environmentalism as unnatural. He does not deny the impact of sprawl, infrastructure failure and pollution, but sees improved strategies as urban planners begin to incorporate green strategies. Such a synthesis of themes is useful when one considers that the urban ecosystem model will continue to grow in the twenty-first century, and provides the best solutions for a growing population’s needs.

One of the most provocative essays comes from Sara Pritchard and Thomas Zeller, who argue that industrialisation deepened relationships between humans and nature, rather than the traditional view that it caused a rift. While their case studies of the role of natural resource use in the opening up of an industrialised world is well taken, their discussion of an envirotechnical landscape fails to persuade. Certainly they are correct that there is no separation of nature and the industrial world, and in the context of the anthology’s title the submission is a good one, but there are good reasons why environmental historians have challenged the role humans have played in the dramatic changes in the natural world in the past 300 years.

While ecologists are writing increasing articles based on the history of food, some continue to take one by surprise. Ann Vileisis’ delightful history of the humble tomato, and the deceptively simple question that titles the article – Are tomatoes natural? – set the stage for the sort of suggestion that makes food purists squirm. Vileisis takes the reader on a trip through tomato history, suggesting that even the simplest foods are mergers of nature and technology. Not even heirloom breeds are entirely “natural” by environmentalist standards.

The final essay by Hugh Gorman and Betsy Mendelsohn ties the collection together with the question “Where does nature and culture begin”? Arguing that increasingly technology and environment are addressed in academic programs as non-adversarial, Gorman and Mendelsohn invite an increasing “intersection” of the methods used by historians of these fields.

All in all, Reuss and Cutcliffe have assembled an intriguing anthology inviting us to expand our view of the interrelationship of nature and technology, and accept that the assumed divide between human culture and the natural environment has rarely existed in quite the way it has been portrayed in environmentalism. The field will grow as increasingly scholars of technology and environment, both in and beyond history, work to understand the reasons behind the assumed divide, and find ways to “re-integrate” nature and culture/technology in political and popular thought as a more holistic entity rather than a dualism. This will take more supradisciplinary work as highlighted in this anthology, but the reviewer looks forward to more collaborations like this one.

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Zitierempfehlung:

Kimberly Reiter: Rezension von: Martin Reuss/Stephen H. Cutcliffe (Hrsg.), The Illusory Boundary. Environment and Technology in History, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville/London 2010, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte (online), 55, 2015, URL: <<http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/afs.cgi?id=81634>> [8.4.2015].