

A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism

By Patrick Allitt

(New York: Penguin Press, 2014. Pp. xv, 384. Illustrations, notes, index. Clothbound, \$29.95; paperbound, \$18.00.)

In this sprawling history of post-World War II environmental issues, Patrick Allitt covers a remarkable range of topics. After smartly opening with the first nuclear explosions and the gathering fear of technology's ability to destroy the earth, Allitt addresses air and water pollution, population and food, oil and energy, toxics and environmental justice, acid rain, the ozone hole, and even tobacco smoke. This is an intellectual history—occasionally it reads like a literature review—so we hear from Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, Barry Commoner, Edward Abbey, and other prominent environmental writers. Allitt also embraces dissenting voices—skeptics and conservatives—including economist Julian Simon, physicist Fred Singer, and political scientist Bjorn Lomborg.

With its clear prose and logical organization, *The Climate of Crisis* assembles these disparate topics and clashing voices in a readable if at times encyclopedic narrative. Unfortunately, the book has significant failings. Allitt's central argument is that "the mood of crisis" created by environmentalists "was usually disproportionate to the actual danger involved," (p. 5) an assertion that requires an honest assessment of the supporting science. This Allitt does not attempt. He trusts science when it meets his approval and dismisses it

when it does not.

Allitt's argument concerning the "mood of crisis" is just one of many assertions that readers may find troubling. Without any discussion of policy in less-developed countries, Allitt declares that "the only societies that can remedy environmental harm are those that have experienced rapid economic growth" (p. 11). After describing the conservative pushback of the 1980s, Allitt announces that "straight antienvironmentalism has largely disappeared by now" (p. 186), apparently forgetting the Koch brothers. Asserting his admiration of America, Allitt claims that "no one in the United States had suffered even a fraction of the environmental degradation endured by the Soviet republics and Eastern Europe" (p. 265), which might be true if phrased better. But Allitt saves many of his troubling statements for his coverage of climate change, which he calls a "phenomenon whose current manifestations are almost imperceptible" (p. 327). On this topic Allitt allows his faith in democracy and capitalism to trump scientific evidence.

Allitt does succeed in revealing the limits of intellectual history as a method for understanding environmentalism. The book rarely moves beyond the realm of ideas, so we do not see the work of environmental activists, who are usually inspired by

local concerns rather than intellectual arguments. Nor does Allitt assess the role of corporate money and conservative think tanks in blocking or weakening regulation. He says little about inequities in power and wealth. Instead, Allitt relies on a narrow portrait of average environmentalists as radicals and hippies, and elides the movement's role in forcing government action. Although he does not emphasize it, the hard work of activists lets Allitt declare that environmental problems are "manageable."

Allitt does allow that regulation has been necessary and sometimes effective. He describes the 1948 Donora smog disaster that took twenty lives

(some of the Americans who *did* suffer from degradation like that found in the U.S.S.R.) and led to a series of regulations that improved air quality. And Allitt rightly emphasizes Ehrlich's overly pessimistic predictions of famine due to population growth. Altogether, however, Allitt's faith in the American system has prevented him from providing a reliable assessment of the age of environmentalism.

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