

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN THE USA

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Résumé :

In the current context of severe political polarization and the mounting effects of climate change, American environmental policies constitute one of the most hotly contested areas of debate in the United States. The anti-environmentalism that has developed amongst conservatives since the Reagan years has made it difficult to agree on how to respond to this threat, indeed on the very existence of it. Once the precursor in environmental policy in the 1970s, the United States is seen today as one of the worst offenders due to the predominant consumerist lifestyle and attachment to fossil fuel energy, as well as its reluctance to commit to international treaties to mitigate climate change. Yet, the image of US recalcitrance and gridlock portrayed by the international media, although relatively accurate at the federal level, masks the environmental dynamism present in sub-federal levels of government and society. States, regions and local governments have risen to the challenge of combating climate change by initiating numerous programs and setting objectives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Citizen groups, institutions and businesses play a significant role in maintaining policies and advancing causes. The issue of environmental protection, which affects nearly every aspect of life, is thus multi-layered and more complex than at first view.

American environmentalism is a movement that grew out of concerns over wilderness and wildlife depletion evident in the late nineteenth century. President Theodore Roosevelt (1900-08) initiated conservation measures designed to manage natural resources wisely to ensure their sustainability for the benefit of present and future generations. Preservation, another current of American ideas, stressed the esthetic and spiritual values of nature, and spawned the idea of national parks. The two visions of humans' relationship to nature gave rise to conflicts over how the nation's natural resources should be used: developed for hydropower, energy and timber, or preserved intact for their intrinsic value. The dominant mindset, based on a belief in a limitless supply, has always favored private ownership and development without accounting for the cost to the environment.

By the 1960s, rapid development had led to heightened resource use and pollution, as well as new existential threats posed by the chemical and atomic industries. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, demonstrated the negative impact of pesticides that were imperiling not just wildlife but humans themselves. The immense success of her book is widely considered to have launched the modern environmental movement. The ethical dimension of preserving nature and

human health came to rival economic interests. The success of the movement, canonized in a series of major environmental protection laws and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, made it the target of the conservative countermovement from the 1980s onward. Ecological values threaten the dominant values of the American creed, causing tensions that have characterized the debate since the advent of environmental protection in the United States.

In order to analyze the historical, cultural, and political contexts that shaped the current situation, topics will include: a review of the political institutions involved in environmental and energy policy, political polarization and its impact on policy, the philosophical underpinnings of the dominant values in American culture, resource depletion and the corresponding rise of ecological thought, the American response to climate change, and international agreements. Key events, developments, or periods will be highlighted during this course, including the creation of the first national parks, the epic battle over the Hetch Hetchy Dam project in Yosemite National Park (1908-1913), the Dust Bowl and federal conservation programs during the 1930s, growing citizen activism during the 1960s that led to the passage of major federal legislation regulating air and water pollution, which, in turn, provoked a powerful anti-environmental movement.

Parallel to the historical overview, this course (continuous assessment including group presentations) will explore numerous issues, such as:

- The “back to nature” movement (hippies, spirituality, organic food)
- National parks: genesis, realization, current issues
- The zero growth movement
- Consumerism as an American invention and its impact on the environment
- American car culture: origins and how it has transformed the landscape
- US dependency on fossil fuels: oil crises, fracking, offshore drilling, XL Keystone/Dakota pipelines
- Renewable energy initiatives
- Impact of industrial food production (factory farming, GMOs, etc.)
- Sustainable business practices: example of Interface, a leading carpet maker
- California as environmental precursor
- The Western states: private vs public land ownership (except the 3 coastal states: WA, OR, CA)
- The greening of municipalities (Climate Action Plans –choose two or more and compare)
- Smart cities or other innovative ecological urban initiatives in the US
- Environmental justice movement (poor, colored or indigenous communities)
- The extension of rights from humans to animals to geographical features (rivers, mountains, etc.)
- Civil disobedience and its limits: the case of...(choose an extremist group: the Animal Liberation Front,

- Earth First!, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, or the Earth Liberation Front)
- Extreme weather events: federal preparedness, now and future?
- Climate activism (350.org, March for Science, Fridays for Future, Divestment movement)

Selected bibliography :

- **Essential reading**

- Clarke, Jeanne and Hanna Cortner, *The State and Nature: Voices Heard, Voices Unheard in America's Environmental Dialogue*, Prentice Hall, 2002
- Rosenbaum, Walter, *Environmental Politics and Policy*, 9th +10th editions, CQ Press, 2014, 2017
- Vig, Norman and Michael Kraft, *Environmental Policy*, 9th +10th editions, CQ Press, 2016, 2019

- **Excellent references**

- Nash, Roderick Frazier, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Yale University Press, 2014 (or earlier editions, first published 1967)
- Nash, Roderick Frazier, *The Rights of Nature*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989
- Worster, Donald, *Dust Bowl*, Oxford University Press, 1979 and any of his other books
- Steiguer J.E. de, *The Age of Environmentalism*, McGraw-Hill, 1997

- **Specific & historical references**

- Carson, Rachel, *Silent Spring*, Fawcett Crest, 1962
- Fox, Josh, *Gasland*, DVD, 2010
- Fox, Stephen, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985
- Hays, Samuel P., *A History of Environmental Politics Since 1945*, Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2000
- Klein, Naomi, *This Changes Everything*, DVD (Avi Lewis, director), 2016
- Leopold, Aldo, *A Sand County Almanac*, Oxford University Press, 1966
- Runte Alfred, *National Parks: The American Experience*, Taylor Trade Publishing, 2010
- Thoreau, Henry David, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, 1849, *Walden*, 1854: literatureproject.com
- Yvard-Djahansouz, Gelareh, *Histoire du mouvement écologique américain*, Ellipses, 2010

- Websites, audio-visual & article references will be given as we go.