

Air pollution history

Reconstructing the historical awareness of air pollution in the course of time is a difficult task which questions the evolution of the notion of environment as a vital milieu and a source of constraints man had to adapt to.

The relationship with the environment is an invitation to enquire about the forms of pollution rejection in relation with the different representations of the ambient milieu which have succeeded each other across centuries. It is in the XIXth century that industrial and urban development strongly established itself on the basis of technical progress allowing freedom from all environmental and even social constraints. Living conditions in cities became very difficult, particularly for factory workers and unfavoured populations, while an educated bourgeoisie widely taking advantage of industrial and technical transformations was rising, contributing to clean up cities. Thus pollution history cannot be separated from social and technical histories. More and more sophisticated measurement instruments developed throughout the XXth century making air pollution a technical object managed through norms. Even if these norms take into account health, they set apart individual perceptions and collective representations, difficult to integrate in a codified and normed vision. In this technicist perspective, a parallel can be suggested with antibiotics, developed and commercialized during the fifties, which allowed mastering numerous diseases but weakened the interest for environmental health. It is only recently that this dimension has come out again as one of the questions raised by an increasingly artificialized world.

These observations can explain why pollution history does not fit an historical approach related to a well identified source. It is an history full of gaps, archives being disseminated in numerous different archive fonds constituted with very diverse documents originating from medical doctors, health and safety inspectors, hygienists, citizens and elected representatives. Air pollution history is as much worth for what it puts into light than for what it conceals. History is a recontextualisation operation which has very little to do with the actors' concern for chronology or historiography and proof documentation. It draws its relevance from a distanced look upon our modernity born on one side from a precise present knowledge of all kinds of emissions and on the other from the lack of knowledge forty years ago or more concerning emissions and their toxicity. Measurement and visibility of air pollution thus first stem from local histories before they become national.

This history nevertheless also questions public policies evolution as regulations have strongly contributed to pollution reduction, whether one thinks about emissions norms for industry or cars, the types of fuels used or European directives. One must not forget to wonder to what extent these policies are backed by social claims and shaped by a breeding-ground favorable to their acceptance.

It would be interesting to have contributions on different themes :

- pollution episodes and pollution management before the industrial period and the « invention of the environment ».
- the relationship between health and air pollution across time and in different cultures
- the history of pollutants measurement and monitoring.
- car pollution and its evolution.
- the evolution of actors' behaviors concerning pollution factors (fuels, technical devices, etc) and of solutions proposed or imposed.

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