The Myth of Silent Spring is perhaps a rather provocative title. It references the book Silent Spring by Rachel Carson, published in 1962, which is often seen as the origin of environmentalism as a mass protest movement. While not denying the original book’s merits, Chad Montrie instead highlights the importance of a bottom-up, mass movement that has been more profoundly radical in its challenge to capitalism.

The first chapter deals with the resistance to industrialisation in the north-eastern part of the United States. The origins of this movement can be seen as early as the start of the eighteenth century. While industrialists were building dams to drive hydraulic wheels, the local people, citing traditional common law precepts, were destroying the dams because they blocked the movement of fish. Around 1850, the courts established a new interpretation of the law: the acceptance of damage caused by industry in exchange for financial compensation for the owners affected. At the same time, the conservation movement emerged, with the aim of creating natural parks for recreational use. Environmentalism was thus split into two opposing camps. Some supported industrial development and looked to set aside protected areas for the enjoyment of the ruling classes, taking opportunities became increasingly widespread for the children of workers’ families. On the initiative of the various strands of the workers’ movement and the civil rights and trade union movement, these camps provided an opportunity to get back to nature and experience community living for children from different backgrounds (Polish, Mexican, black American and more) as well as offering a political education. These opportunities became increasingly widespread between the 1920s and the 1950s. It was in 1960, in Port Huron, at a summer camp of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union that the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) manifesto was adopted, heralding the radicalisation of the student movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

The third chapter demonstrates the importance of the workers’ environmental movement between 1945 and 1980, often in alliance with black mayors of major cities. Very early on, the campaign against pesticides was launched by the United Farm Workers (UFW) union, led by César Chavez and Dolores Huerta, and it mobilised a large number of farm workers of Mexican and Filipino origin. The Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) and UAW federations were also very active. Many members of the workers’ movement rejected the blackmail discourse of “jobs versus health”.

It is regrettable that the author remains locked into a purely American perspective. This weakness leaves him unable to understand the ambiguities of leaders like Walter Reuther of the UAW. Reuther’s refusal to take a stand against the Vietnam War and his alignment with the policies of Lyndon B. Johnson (US President from 1963 to 1969) partly explain the difficulties of dovetailing the trade union struggles of the day with the activism of the new generations of the civil rights movement and student youth. In the mining sector, occupational health demands and calls for environmental protection gave rise to a very harsh conflict between grass-roots demands and a trade union leadership that adopted anti-democratic practices. But far from being an American peculiarity, the same dynamic can be found in other countries, as, for instance, Paul Jobin explains in his book about trade union renewal in Japan.1

The fact remains, however, that this is a book of fundamental importance. It shows that behind apparent unanimity lie clashing ideas about environmentalism. The question of what kind of society we want is critical, and it is clearly not something to be settled by scientific data alone. By showing that historical accounts often overlook anonymous working-class mobilisations, this book makes a major contribution to the current political debates among the new generation of political ecology activists.

— Laurent Vogel