

June 27 Reading: *The Postwar North American Environmental Politics*

Consequences of Postwar Growth

After the Second World War, the environment in both Canada and the United States was faced with new problems. The economies of both countries were driven by consumer desires that constantly produced a new set of goods, easily purchased and as easily disposed. The advent of plastics and synthetics, for instance, lowered prices of furniture, toys, and other domestic products. ... The automobile also clogged the urban environment. ... While granting greater mobilities to some, the new superhighways and expressways cut through and often isolated or destroyed poor neighborhoods, intensifying class and racial segregation; as they united disparate parts of Canada and the United States, and provided greater access to wild spaces, they also bulldozed through deserts, meadows, and wetlands. ... During this Atomic Age, North Americans were faced with a series of difficult choices (Miller 119).

Rise of Environmentalism

The 1970s opened with a striking demonstration of the growing importance of the environment in North American politics. ... As world population continued to soar and to concentrate in urban areas that swelled in size, the environmental impact in Canada and the United States was profound: Wetlands disappeared, farmlands were swallowed up, rivers "died" because of the high levels of industrial sludge. Human conflict escalated as well; battles over wealth and power came to be conjoined with racial violence. Those who could flee to the suburbs did so; half of the US population made that trek, as did one-third of Canadians. Left behind were those with few resources, forced to live in inner cities that were abandoned, boarded up, or burned out. ... In response, the Canadian and US governments developed new agencies to respond to what appeared to be an endless array of environmental problems (Miller 142-3).

Emerging Conflicts

When the U.S. and Canadian governments radically reduced catch

limits of cod to preserve the species, their fishing industries challenged the legitimacy of such regulations. U.S. loggers responded angrily when the Endangered Species Act was invoked to protect the northern spotted owl; the chemical industry fought hard against attempts to protect riparian and marine habitats by regulating industry discharge of effluent into rivers and estuaries. ... Battling for attention, too, were inner-city and rural grassroots organizations arguing that minority populations suffered from a disproportionate share of maladies associated with toxic dumps and nuclear waste. Their non-violent demonstrations for "environmental justice" took place at the same time that eco-radicals advocated a violent defense of Mother Earth. The Earth Liberation Front, founded in 1992, has burned equipment, blown up research laboratories, and ravaged tree farms to inflict economic damage on those corporations and universities it believed were responsible for environmental despoliation (Miller 171).

International Concerns

Complicating the resolution of these varied environmental tensions was the emergence of a more conservative political climate in the United States, whose representatives often came to power based on their anti-environmentalist agenda. One result was the North American Free Trade Agreement. Environmentalists were convinced that the treaty lacked substantial environmental regulatory controls. The conservative agenda also helped shape a series of international conferences in the 1990s at which treaties on global warming, ecological preservation, and economic sustainability were negotiated. ... The U.S. generally refused to sign the protocols or accords that committed signatories to abide by strict environmental controls. Canada, by contrast, took a leading role in articulating the need for the kind of binding agreements that the US rejected (Miller 171).

Miller, Char, ed. The Atlas of U.S. and Canadian Environmental History. New York: Routledge, 2003.